

The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens

Graham Ward

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009 (317 pages)

Graham Ward's latest book is, in a sense, a sequel to his well-regarded first foray into political theology in *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000). *The Politics of Discipleship* is different from this earlier work in its attempt, in the second half of the book, to put forward something like a constructive political theology. Ward consciously sets out a theologically driven "cultural imaginary" to assist and equip Christians to deal with what he views as the pervasive challenges to faithful discipleship posed by twenty-first-century life. Ward states at the outset that the book is intended as an "impolite" case for a post-materialist theological ethics and politics—or as he states in the introduction, "forget tea and sandwiches with the Vicar; there is genuine struggle here" (33).

The author, currently professor of contextual theology and ethics at the University of Manchester (and an Anglican priest), is associated with the Anglo-Catholic and ecumenical theological movement known as Radical Orthodoxy (led by the prolific English theologian, John Milbank). His oeuvre is characterized by a provocative engagement with contemporary urban culture from the perspective of a radical theologian steeped in continental philosophy.

The Politics of Discipleship divides neatly into two sections. In the first, "The World," the author offers a brief but impressively sustained critique of contemporary political and economic practices. The three chapters of section 1—"Democracy," "Globalization," and "Postsecularity"—set out the author's view of the damage wrought by capitalism and modernity (and its more recent offspring, postmodernity) in the fields of politics, economics, and religion, respectively. In common with other postmodern theorists, Ward closely links late capitalism with the development of a globalized postmodern culture.

Sightful cultural references to the *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* books and movies as well as other cultural phenomena abound in this section of the book. It is not often that one reads references to the Renaissance theorist Pico della Mirandola and the movie *Men in Black* within the space of a single paragraph. While such an approach can sometimes feel a little forced, most readers will doubtless find some aspects of his cultural critique thought provoking, at the very least.

In section 2, "The Church," Ward advances a theological method of resistance and reconstruction founded on an explicitly trinitarian and eschatological reading of history and political life. In common with Stanley Hauerwas and Radical Orthodox theologians, he sees the church as the proper site of sociopolitical reflection and engagement. In conversation with theorists as diverse as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and N. T. Wright, Ward uses the apostle Paul's understanding of the human body and the body of Christ as the point of departure for his own richly conceived theological anthropology ("The Metaphysics of the Body," chapter 6).

In the final chapter, “The Politics of Election and of Following,” Ward uncompromisingly advocates a theocratic approach to political life (though not in a hierocratic form) but from the standpoint that God alone is truly sovereign. Reflecting expertly on a range of texts from the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, he creatively re-imagines political authority from an explicitly theological perspective in a way reminiscent of the work of his fellow Anglican theologian, Oliver O’Donovan.

Ward recurrently views developments in modern democracy and economics as presupposing a masked or concealed metaphysics. Like the *Communio* theologian David L. Schindler, Ward sees the deployment of a metaphysical outlook as unavoidable in the practice of economics and politics and the assertion of a neutral political space as a misleading fiction. The plea in *The Politics of Discipleship* for a new metaphysics is in stark contrast to some other postmodern continental philosophers with an interest in theology (such as Gianni Vattimo). However, whether Ward outlines a truly metaphysical position (in the Thomist sense of metaphysics as the *philosophical* science of “being *qua* being”) is highly questionable as he—in common with other Radical Orthodox thinkers—largely conflates metaphysics with revealed theology.

Readers who reacted negatively to the critique of unfettered capitalism in Pope Benedict XVI’s 2009 encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*, will find Ward’s broadsides against market economics unconvincing. Although Ward declares his intention to be impolite from the outset, he is careful in the main not to demonize his ideological opponents. Ward’s selection of neoliberal foes (Hayek and Friedman) is, however, rather predictable. It would have been more enlightening had he chosen broadly pro-market revivers of classical political economy such as the social market theorists Walter Eucken or Wilhelm Röpke or the contemporary Italian economist, Luigino Bruni. The reader would then be able to discern the extent to which Ward’s position is in fact distinct from the sort of political and economic vision elaborated in Catholic social doctrine as expressed in and since the Second Vatican Council.

Similarly, Ward’s engagement with contemporary political philosophy sometimes lacks nuance. For example, John Rawls’s later understanding of political liberalism is dismissed without proper consideration (140–41) and is interpreted as crudely privatizing religious belief. This is a common enough caricature of Rawls’s position, but its inaccuracy is clear from reading a 1998 interview with Rawls in *Commonweal* magazine (John Rawls, *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999], 661).

The Politics of Discipleship is part of a Baker Academic series, The Church and Postmodern Culture, edited by James K. A. Smith. Books in the series are written not only for an academic audience in critical theory or theology but also for Christians of an intellectual bent across denominations. Although the prose style in this work is generally less abstruse than that found in much of John Milbank’s output, a reader largely unfamiliar with the names and core ideas of continental philosophers will find much of the book hard going. Ward’s influences are mostly, though not exclusively, from this milieu and in a text of 280 pages, he cites literally hundreds of theologians and thinkers. The reader will find this either distracting, or in the case of this reviewer, a helpful pointer to an extraordinarily broad range of relevant academic literature.

That being said, it is difficult to see how students or scholars of political theology at any level, or graduate theology students generally, could fail to find *The Politics of Discipleship* anything other than bracing and rewarding—even if they disagree with some of the author’s fundamental premises. Seminarians, priests, and pastors interested in the intersection between culture and theology will also find Ward engaging and insightful on some of the baleful contradictions of contemporary social and economic life. As a contribution to Christian political theology, *The Politics of Discipleship* is a work of estimable quality.

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Dialogue of Love: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic Ecumenist

Eduardo J. Echeverria

Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2010 (258 pages)

In this book, Eduardo Echeverria, a graduate of Trinity Christian College, The Free University of Amsterdam, and the Angelicum and currently professor of philosophy at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, places major representatives of the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition (Herman Bavinck, G. C. Berkouwer, Herman Dooyeweerd) in conversation with major representatives of twentieth-century Roman Catholic thought (Romano Guardini, John Paul II, Benedict XVI) on a select set of topics.

Echeverria devotes his first three chapters to a comparison of neo-Calvinist and Roman Catholic doctrine of the Church. The first two are devoted to unpacking the meaning of the statement of Vatican II that the “one Church of Christ ... *subsists* in the Catholic Church” (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). Echeverria insists that this statement does not represent the adoption on the part of the Catholic Church of an ecclesial relativism, in which the Church of Christ may subsist in the Catholic Church as well as in other bodies, thus reducing the Catholic Church to another denomination. Nonetheless, for Echeverria, the ecclesiology of Vatican II does represent a step forward in ecumenism, inasmuch as it recognizes that *elements* of the one Church of Christ exist outside the visible bounds of the Catholic Church.

Echeverria’s third chapter on ecclesiology sets up a triologue between Dooyeweerd, Guardini, and Ernst Troeltsch concerning the adequacy of Troeltsch’s well-known categorization of denominations into either the “Church-type” or the “Sect-type.” On one hand, Echeverria is at pains to refute Dooyeweerd’s assertion that Roman Catholic ecclesiology is the “purest embodiment” of Troeltsch’s Church-type, in which the Church is regarded primarily as an institution that should control all other temporal societal structures. Catholic ecclesiology does *not* conceive of the Church primarily as an institution but as the mystical Body of Christ, as Echeverria demonstrates from Catholic magisterial documents as well as the writings of John Paul II, Romano Guardini, Avery Dulles, and others. On