

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

The Goodness of God: Theology, the Church, and Social Order

D. Stephen Long

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2001 (336 pages)

Part I of Long's book, at once systematic theology, ecclesiology, moral theology, sacramental theology, and social ethics, does a splendid job limning the parameters of what we might term, with John Paul II, a "participated theonomy" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 41) that avoids an extrinsicist heteronomy and a subjectivist autonomy. The moral life, far more than rules about our actions, is something greater than ourselves—ultimately God's grace liturgically received—that "catches us" and allows us to "come into our own" (37). Since that grace is received in baptism, the moral life is a "living into our baptism" (120). Using Blondel's distinction, Long shows that freedom does not mean "infinitely willing" but "willing the infinite" (120), so that we need not speak of the Good foregone but of the Good received. Authentic freedom, the central insight of John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor*, pervades Long's text.

Authentic freedom is teleological: The moral life is an ordering of all acts to our final end, an end that is always beyond us but at the same time is in us (87). Our movement toward God is "a gift we possess but that is never our possession" (88). Nature, then, is always seen in light of its infusion with the supernatural (86, relying on de Lubac), which means that the virtuous life is fundamentally not natural but theological. Long's treatment of the theological virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the Beatitudes, is for this reviewer the highlight of the book (168–72). *The Goodness of God* is within us, contrary to the Kantian "blasphemy of the a priori" that posits an

autonomous self capable of a Gnostic knowing of good and evil separate from the Good (124, 129).

Central to Long's project is a bold positing of religious particularity, avoiding the Kantian habit (mediated through Weber, Troeltsch, and the Niebuhrs) whereby "[T]he Gospel is essentialized into disinterested love that maintains universal beneficence against all particularity." Here, ethics replaces dogma and "becomes one more immanent anthropological discourse ..." (76). Some have criticized the "radical orthodoxy project" for a loss of particularity, and perhaps Long's primary contribution to the project is a fresh focus on the same (another being his virtually jargon-free prose). It is all too easy to flatten out religious particularity, like a food court in a mall "where every culture is represented and difference is putatively affirmed, but the difference is already contained by the overarching edifice called the 'mall'" (77). Long relies heavily on the Catholic tradition (and Saint Thomas) to retrieve particularity, which ultimately redounds to the real presence in the Eucharist, which is, "the condition of possibility for all human meaning" (67, quoting Pickstock).

Long is absolutely correct about affirming particularity, and his very Catholic kind of particularity is a brilliant ecumenical move from a United Methodist theologian. He is mistaken, in this reviewer's opinion, in his thesis (subtly threaded throughout Part 1 in an almost tantalizing way) that liberal political and economic institutions "flatten out" (79) particularity. He is mistaken in claiming that "[l]iberalism seeks to destroy all intermediate and/or alternative social formations that might provide space between the state and the individual" (122). My proof: The "radical orthodoxy movement" with which we might affiliate Long *is* precisely one such alternative community not afraid of bringing its particularity, unadulterated, into the public sphere. It is not flattened out; rather, our political and economic institutions allow that particularity as much influence as it can muster. Perhaps on this side of the eschaton there is some alternative political/economic arrangement that would somehow nurture Christian particularity (without being a theocratic arrangement that Long explicitly eschews), but we do not know what that would look like and cannot find any vision of it in Long's book (though his synthesis of Yoder, O'Donovan, and Hauerwas purports some such vision [89–104]). Until some alternative arrangement appears on the horizon, the answer to Long's challenge to liberal political and economic institutions will have to be, "compared to what?" Christianity, of course, exists as a "different city" (155) but one that can engage liberal institutions without succumbing to them. A Tertullianesque sectarianism emerges as Long questions whether Christians can be involved at all in the various functions of the liberal state (266, 296, see also 136).

Long's suspicion of liberalism in Part 1 turns into a harangue in Part 2: "The market as salvific institution is and must be heretical. All Christians should recognize its deceitful power and oppose it" (260). The very use of the market automatically turns it into a false god, a false salvation. "The world market becomes a kind of text that we daily read and meditate upon.... [E]conomists have become priests who now interpret this new text and thus provide us with our future security and give our lives their ulti-

mate meaning” (259). (A good antidote to Long’s economic analysis would be Jennifer Roback Morse’s *Love and Economics*).

Oddly, right in the midst of such excess, Long at times provides an insight that gets it just right: “The State and the market can serve only limited ends. This necessitates some *other* social formation that is incapable of being totalized within the State or market and that reminds states and markets of their limits. This is the role of the church. Only when it owns its proper origin and function can these other social institutions know their place” (256, also cf. 280). Perfect.

Liberal institutions are vulnerable to overstepping their bounds—hence, liberal democracy is vulnerable to becoming a “thinly disguised totalitarianism,” as John Paul II put it. To ignore this vulnerability is to politicize the faith, making it a means to a temporal end (like liberalism), but to utopianize Christianity is, likewise, a politicization of the faith.

While Long’s embrace in Part 1 of the Eucharistic heart of Catholicism is stunning, it is a real tragedy that one finds, about thirty pages into Part 2, the out-of-character claim that “Here the Church’s teaching contradicts itself.” He is about to suborder Catholic doctrine to his radical pacifism, a central component of his anti-liberal tirade. Having soundly critiqued proportionalism, now Long suddenly notes that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* borders on that very mistake in its doctrine on the legitimacy of self-defense. That doctrine admonishes one to use a proportionate amount of violence in rebuking an aggressor. Long mistakenly sees proportionalism here and thinks that the just-war doctrine is incompatible with the teaching about “turning the other cheek” that the *Catechism* also promulgates. *But use of proportionate reasoning is not proportionalism*. There is not a thing wrong with proportionate reasoning—we use it to make any number of prudential decisions, from deciding how much of our income to tithe to deciding just how much force is needed to repel an aggressor. What we may not do is use proportionate reasoning to falsely justify an intrinsically evil act—that is what proportionalism erroneously does. Repelling an aggressor, even if it means killing him, is not intrinsically evil; the act is one of self-defense, and the unintended second effect is the injury inflicted. No proportionalism here. Throughout Part 2, Long advances additional tendentious arguments on the issues of homosexuality, abortion, dying, and as already noted, varied economic issues.

These caveats should not deter students of Christian social thought from reading this fascinating book. The reader is richly rewarded with top-rate summaries of the key insights of an array of classical and contemporary thinkers (e.g., Plato and Aristotle, Saint Thomas, Kant, both Niebuhrs, Barth, von Balthasar, Bonhoeffer, and Nietzsche, to name a few). A separate “Name Index” signals extraordinary breadth of sources. Long combines fine prose and rigorous reasoning. This reviewer particularly enjoyed Long’s uncanny knack for discovering self-referential absurdity in his opponents’ arguments. For example: “To say that this person is evil is to do something more than merely give an opinion. If someone replies, ‘I think that is only your opinion’ ... even in her effort to diminish the scope of the judgment of evil, she bears witness to the

power that the term *good* still holds, for she seeks to undo the damage that *evil* invokes by reducing it to mere opinion” (32). And, refuting Kant’s limit between the phenomenal and noumenal, “such a barricade only works if we also claim implicitly to know what is on the other side.... [O]nly if we claim to know with certainty what cannot be known with certainty would we know where to place the barricade in the first place” (56; also enjoy 39, 41, 56, 93, 132, 286). This and so much more in Long’s highly synthetic recovery of theological particularity for ethics should not be missed.

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**The Social God and the Relational Self:
A Trinitarian Theology of the *Imago Dei*
Stanley J. Grenz**

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(345 pages)

Extensively published theologian Stanley Grenz, who teaches at Carey Theological College and Regent College in Vancouver, here gives us the first book of a projected six-volume systematic theology (or major contribution thereto, at any rate) generally titled “The Matrix of Christian Theology.” It is a dense and learned work, full of carefully explicated histories of ideas drawn from theology, biblical studies, philosophy, and psychology. Every reader will profit from paying close attention, learning or re-learning the major trends in Christian thought from the enormous amount of material here presented in carefully drawn summaries, complete with copious footnotes, blessedly placed at the bottom of the page. Grenz’s reach is fully ecumenical, covering Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox writers across the ages in an even-handed and thoughtful manner, and all brought to the service of a coherent, well-argued thesis.

That thesis is that the “postmodern” deconstruction of the concept of “self” as a given inward identity poses a challenge that Christian theology is able to meet handily, thanks to a reconfigured theological anthropology dependent on an understanding of the Trinitarian God as “social” or “relational.” The doctrine of the Trinity has experienced a revival of interest in the twentieth century, since Barth, to the point where Grenz can claim that there is now general agreement on its centrality. The current, widely accepted model grants the traditional expression of three “persons” sharing one essence (so there is no tritheism), but with distinct centers of will and purpose. The “threeness” matters; it means something important. “Person” here is defined relationally rather than substantially. Just as human persons are defined by their relations, embedded in community, so God is also to be (re)conceived in terms of relationality—although, of course, with due caution about the imprecision and inaccuracy of metaphor and analogy applied to God the ineffable.