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The Essentials of Christian Thought: Seeing Reality Through the Biblical Story (Book Review)

Jamin Hubner

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that “He fantasizes that one year, his annual report will simply put, ‘Rereading the Complete Works of Henry James with Special Reference to Getting to the End of *The Golden Bowl* This Time’” (68).

A final way that the corporate university dehumanizes faculty is that it has “imposed an instrumental view of not only time but also each other. We are enjoined to spend our time in ways that can be measured and registered in accounting systems” (72). In order to encourage more community and collaboration in the university, we have to break from the corporate model and see each other as human beings, whole people, instead of as a position or rank (88). They argue, and I agree from experience, that by seeing each other as human beings, we will be more patient and compassionate with each other when we do not “produce” as quickly as corporate life would like. Ultimately, this “humanization” of our profession will trickle down and help us to think of our students as human beings, and treat them with the compassion and respect they deserve as humans (88).

Over the past academic year, I tried to implement some of their suggestions and bring “Slow” to my own professional life as a faculty member. But I felt even more push-back from colleagues than administrators, which makes me wonder if Berg and Seeber’s “movement” could ever get started. For example, I tried to more carefully guard my time this year. The response

from some of my colleagues was that I was being selfish and un-collegial, while others said that I must be favored somehow by my administration, which appeared to allow me so much “free time.” A month or two ago, instead of driving, I walked to pick my daughter up from an appointment, a walk that took close to 45 minutes round trip. As Berg and Seeber suggested, the walk was invigorating and stimulating—it was good for my soul to be out of doors by myself with my thoughts, and walking and talking with my daughter on the way home was a much richer experience than had I driven. But, that was 30–45 minutes I was not in the office, I was not responding to student emails, I was not grading papers—all things that I had to catch up on later. Plus, I had colleagues later checking why I was not in my office during “business hours.”

I hope Berg and Seeber are correct, and I hope they kick-start a movement; however, given my own recent experience, I think it will take a long while to change academic culture, and it will take a community of like-minded faculty members who are willing to think outside the corporate box and who are courageous enough to challenge administrators in thinking differently. I hope it happens in my lifetime, because then being part of a faculty might be filled with joy and wonder and life instead of despair, delivered through meetings and deadlines and data.

The Essentials of Christian Thought: Seeing Reality Through the Biblical Story. Olson, Roger. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017. 256 pp. ISBN: 978-0310521556. Reviewed by Jamin Hübner, Associate Professor of Christian Studies and Director of Institutional Effectiveness, John Witherspoon College.

The concept of a “Christian philosophy” has always been a controversial one. What does this pair of words even mean? If we knew, how does Christian philosophy relate to theology? To biblical scholarship? To education? Are the teachings and narrative(s) in the Christian tradition restricted to a particular philosophical orientation, such as ethics?

Philosophy itself can be intimidating enough, and questions like these and others compound the difficulty of such inquiries. Roger Olson, perhaps best known by his former work as General Editor of *The Christian Scholar’s Review* and a prolific career as a seminary professor, attempts to tackle these basic questions in a ground-level introduction to the concept of Christian philosophy, especially of Christian

metaphysics or ontology.

The central assumption behind *The Essentials of Christian Thought* is that there is such thing as a “Christian metaphysic.” In Olson’s words, “the Bible does contain an implicit metaphysical vision of ultimate reality—the reality that is most important, final, highest, and behind everyday appearances” (12). A declaration of an “implicit” vision, though, is not the same as saying the Scriptures “teach” philosophy. Rather, Olson argues that there is framework, coherent at some basic level, behind and shot through all that emerges from the biblical story. In delineating this claim, Olson ably navigates through the various misunderstandings, potential anachronisms, and historical contexts of metaphysics as it relates to broader

philosophical agendas.

After this necessary but somewhat slow introduction, the book immediately stretches the reader in an enlightening look at epistemology. Olson—like his contemporaries Stanley Grenz, William Placher, and John Franke—is an explicitly “postliberal” and “post-foundationalist” theologian who sees the task of theology as “map-making” (as opposed to, e.g., fact-organizing). He views the Bible as offering a non-totalizing (i.e., non-coercive) metanarrative (44), and he contends that the Christian world-and-life-view is, indeed, located and situated, but that its being located and situated ultimately *empowers* the truthfulness of Christianity instead of trivializing it. Christianity “can stand on its own two feet in the marketplace of ideas” (42), and “just because one cannot *prove* Christianity true to all people does not mean that it is not true *for all people*” (45). When an apologetic push comes to shove in our pluralistic and postmodern context, the Christian faith and its philosophical contributions are “the most reasonable of all beliefs about ultimate reality because it has greater explanatory power than alternatives insofar as it provides satisfying answers to life’s ultimate questions” (50). This grand claim is made cautiously, however, as Olson explicitly distances himself from fundamentalist biblicism, artificial certainties, and overly simplistic constructions of Christian theology.

In the sections following these claims (chapter 2 and interlude 2), clarifications are provided about the meaning of the term “supernatural” and the claim that the universe is “personal.” Olson’s definition of “ultimate reality” feels somewhat undeveloped, as he surveys alternative visions propounded in Middle-Platonism, ethical syncretism, and process theology. But the major point eventually becomes clear: it is a problem to say that “the Bible itself does not have a philosophy, a metaphysic, and stands in need of one borrowed from elsewhere” (67). In the “Interlude 2” section, Olson introduces two Christian thinkers whose approach serves as a template for addressing this problem and appears frequently throughout the rest of the book: Edmond La Beaume Cherbonnier and Claude Tresmontant. These two scholars, Olson contends, properly develop the basic contours of a Christian philosophy (and its method) and avoid all the pitfalls mentioned earlier in the volume.

Because Greek thought had such a deep impact

on Christian thought—early, Medieval, and even Reformation-era—Olson spends some time explaining how Greek philosophy can intrude on the proper relationship between the biblical story and metaphysics. This intrusion trickles down into now “orthodox” ideas about God and time, impassibility, and other doctrinal points. The work of Emil Brunner and Abraham Heschel is cited often, largely to show that “there is a biblical, narrative-based metaphysics that contrasts with other metaphysical visions of ultimate reality, is not irrational, lies at the foundation of Christianity itself, and is being retrieved by Jewish and Christian scholars who are also separating it from extrabiblical philosophies that conflict with it” (99). What do these “extrabiblical philosophies” consist of? Chapter 4 answers in no unclear terms: Manicheist dualism, monism (pantheism, emanationism, and absolute idealism), panentheism, and naturalism.

This delineation must be balanced, however. As Olson argues, “[t]here is agreement that God is *supernatural, personal*, but *not human* (except in the Incarnation), but...the turning point...[.]the point of great controversy, to boil it down to one word, is *vulnerability*” (138). In solving this conundrum, Olson argues strongly in favor of “divine self-limitation,” where God is “vulnerable *because* he makes himself so out of love” (139). The next chapter touches on this idea and others relating to theology proper, such as outlining issues with God as “being itself” (Tillich)—what it means for God to be “independent,” “supernatural,” “good,” and “vulnerable” and “eternal,” in contrast to Greek philosophical influences on classic theism.

Chapter 6 then moves from theology proper to the doctrine of creation, and it more carefully unfolds a biblical model of creation in contrast to alternatives surveyed earlier. “The biblical view of God and the world,” Olson says, “is truly *dialectical*—two truths [transcendence and immanence] that seem contradictory to the human mind’s ordinary ways of thinking but are interdependent” (185-86). This is also true with respect to God’s lordship and God’s use (“need”) of creation (192). The interlude following this chapter unfolds a lucid historical outline of the rise and fall of metaphysics as it relates to the more recent science and religion debate in twentieth-century theology. Following the lead of both Plantinga and Brunner, Olson refines the real discrepancies as being between

science and naturalism, and thus shows incompatibilities between naturalism (not simply “science”) and Christian philosophy.

The next chapter naturally flows into anthropology, where the basic features of humanity are outlined. Psalms 8 and 14 guide the discussion. Human beings are said to be “cocreators” and “dependent but good” (208). The fall of humanity is then surveyed, which includes the somewhat innovative philosophical concept of “the heart” in biblical theology, human freedom before and after the fall, and alternative anthropologies such as gnostic and secular humanist. “Christians need to recover and reclaim the concept of humanism for themselves,” we read. “It was a mistake to ever allow naturalists to own it” (222).

Continuing along these lines, the final interlude addresses the age-old debate on depravity and freedom. With Cherbonnier, Olson contends that both Augustine and Pelagius were “wrong while both were also right” (233). “Solidarity” is the solution to the problem, whereby the more recent individualist hamartiology is offset by the fact that sin and sin structures only exist in relationships and networks: “Responsibility for sin cannot be transferred away from the individual who acts freely, but it can be and must be *shared* by all because sin is transmitted as well as chosen. For the Bible responsibility ‘is always mutual,’ because no person is an island” (233-34). In the end, “free will is the limited but real power of contrary choice that makes the individual fully but not exclusively responsible for the hardness of heart which is the essence of *sin*” (234).

Finally, in a related but altogether different chapter, Olson outlines a model for “integration of faith and learning.” This appendix outlines the pitfalls of various attempts at trying to create educational models that are distinctively “Christian,” giving a quick overview of Bible colleges, liberal arts integration, and contemporary proposals for such integration. His own proposal is summarized in several principles:

“A basic assumption of faith-learning integration is ‘all truth is God’s truth whatever its source’” (240). This does not mean all theories are from God, or that all truth has been revealed. It means (among other things) that whatever is discovered cannot be independent of God.

“Faith-learning integration assumes that the biblical-Christian world and life perspective, meta-

physic, is rooted in divine revelation and therefore forms the center and foundation of all Christian thinking” (242). This means that “insofar as the biblical-Christian perspective is faithful to revelation, it is the controlling paradigm for all Christian thinking,” and that Christians should “allow the Bible to absorb the world” (243).

(Quoting Brunner): “Impossible it is that any essential position of Christian faith should be affected...by changes in the scientific view of the world” (245).

“...there are layers of reality, and some of them are more open to real and necessary conflict between Christian faith and scientific theorizing” (249). As an example, “there is no such thing as Christian mathematics,” and in psychology “sin cannot be reduced to behavior caused by ‘nature and nurture’” (250).

The Essentials of Christian Thought would probably not do well as an introductory text for Christian philosophy. It would, however, provide a sound platform for budding Christian thinkers to illustrate one attempt at how a Christian theologian and philosopher approaches the subject with informed scholarship and critical reasoning.

Many of the themes and arguments in the book strongly overlap with the various contributions and goals of classic Reformed thought—and Kuyperian/Neo-Calvinist thought in general. Olson’s keen eye towards unworkable philosophical reductionisms, distancing from simplistic fundamentalism, sensitivities towards modernism, repeated reference to both the whole and parts of the biblical story, and intentional efforts at reclaiming “lost ground” that is rightfully God’s, is easily seen and integral to his thought. Calvin and other Reformed thinkers are also cited favorably in the book. That they are is altogether interesting, given that Olson is perhaps the most vocal critic of Reformed theology today (authoring both *Against Calvinism* and *Arminian Theology*). His theological stance does come out (at least clearly) in the chapter on human freedom and perhaps, to some degree, in the discussion on divine impassibility. But these divergences are the exception and not the norm, as is noticeable. As a result, this work leaves readers intrigued, and perhaps curious, about the real relationship of historically competing theologies and a (potentially) more unifying Christian philosophy.