

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Christianity and Secular Reason: Classical Themes and Modern Developments*

Christianity and Secular Reason: Classical Themes and Modern Developments, Jeffrey Bloechl (editor), University of Notre Dame Press, 2012, ISBN: 9780268022280

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In recent years there has been a renewed focus on the relationship between faith and reason. This resurgence has been largely sparked by Charles Taylor's tome, *A Secular Age* (2007), and the fascinating exchange between Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas (2007) on the pre-political foundations of society. *Christianity and Secular Reason* (2012) builds on these two works to explore the relationship between faith and reason; in particular secular reason. As the editor, Jeffrey Bloechl, explains, the volume "attends to the relation between Christianity and secular reason at points where each seems to contest the self-assurance of the other" and at another level it also illustrates that secular reason "is deeply troubling to both Christian thought and the philosophy often called 'continental'." (13)

Christianity and Secular Reason is a collection of chapters (formerly papers) exploring a variety of areas within the relationship between faith and reason. This variety is in part a good thing because a wide range of themes and threads are explored and canvassed, but it also means that the book lacks a general sense of coherence. Some chapters seem only tangentially related to the theme of the book. For example, Kevin Hart in his chapter on the "Phenomenality and Christianity" mainly focuses on using phenomenology to see what can be said or not said about God. While an interesting exercise in itself, apart from showing the use of reason within faith, this chapter does little to explore the relationship the book purports to examine. The book also suffers from an excessive use of jargon. This results in many chapters being difficult to engage with and restricts the book's audience to those who have some knowledge of Thomistic thought and Continental philosophy. Further, the book only explores the idea of reason and faith from a Christian, and more specifically Roman Catholic, perspective which has resulted in parts of the book having more to do with justifying theology rather than exploring the relationship or limits of both faith and reason.

These criticisms aside, many chapters of the book are well worth reading and directly examine aspects of the

relationship between faith and secular reason. Of particular note are Cyril O'Regan's chapter on "Kant: Boundaries, Blind Spots and Supplements" and Kevin Corrigan's chapter on "Athens, Jerusalem, and ... : Overcoming the Exclusivist Paradigms of the Past". These are thought provoking chapters that address how we construct the paradigms of faith and reason and what might lie beyond such boundaries. Corrigan argues that both faith and reason need each other; faith needs reason to cure its pathologies, while reason needs faith to purify itself and stop it becoming self-destructive. In saying this, Corrigan echoes Ratzinger but goes further to argue that even the categories of faith and reason can be unhelpful and that all questions should be allowed regardless of how the questions are classified. Building on this, O'Regan explores the Kantian approach to determining the categories of faith and reason and their limits. He argues that reason attempts to colonise faith because it "cannot accept being beholden to another discourse." (107) O'Regan considers this colonisation to be problematic because reason has five interrelated deficits which it is often blinded to which faith can help remedy. As such, the relationship between faith and reason is not mutually exclusive but overlapping and positive and should be permitted to exist in relationship.

What this relationship between faith and reason looks like in practice is discussed in the last two chapters where James Swindal and Frederick G Lawrence explore and build upon ideas emerging from the dialogue between Ratzinger and Habermas. Swindal explores the contrasting views of Ratzinger and Habermas in relation to the place of religion and reason. Swindal places two caveats on the views expressed by Ratzinger and Habermas because they prioritise a cognitive solution to the relationship between secular and religious order, and also adopt a functionalist account of religion and reason which Swindal is opposed to. Lawrence usefully explores Habermas' ideas on the power of secular reason within democracy and contrasts this to Ratzinger's own views, as supplemented by Bernard Lonergan, that transcendent goods are important in the democratic sphere. This supplementation helps further the conversation between Habermas and Ratzinger and fills in many of the conversation gaps and assumptions that existed in the original dialogue. These last two

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chapters offer new and useful insights about the limitations of the Habermas and Ratzinger dialogue and some new ways to further thinking about the relationship between faith and reason.

While *Christianity and Secular Reason* suffers from a lack of cohesiveness and a restricted gaze (through the looking glass of Roman Catholicism and Continental philosophy), the book frequently raises interesting questions or new perspectives to understand the dynamic relationship between faith and reason. While the book provides few answers, it assists readers interested in the relationship between faith and reason to ask better questions and to understand some of the limitations of the existing

dialogue. Because of this, *Christianity and Secular Reason* makes a valuable, albeit limited, contribution to the resurgence in thinking about the relationship between faith and reason.

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