

Reviews

**THE RECOVERY OF
CONTESTATION AND THE
APOPHATIC BODY OF CHRIST:
ENGAGING GRAHAM WARD'S
*THE POLITICS OF DISCIPLESHIP***

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The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens. By Graham Ward. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009, 320+ pp.

As the third volume in his theological engagement with the postmodern city, the reading of Graham Ward's latest offering evokes an aphorism penned by the influential French novelist Honoré de Balzac: "hope is a memory that desires."¹ In many ways, then, *The Politics of Discipleship* is a natural continuation of the reflections on Charles Péguy's elucidation of the surprising character of hope with which Ward closes his earlier work on *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*.² Indeed, Ward's latest contribution can profitably be read as an exploration of the complex working of hope in the

¹ As cited in David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 50. Harvey's reading of Balzac bears comparison with Ward's reading of Sorel, especially with respect to the function, circulation and power of myth in reshaping the cultural imaginary.

² See Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 165-74.

context of a struggle over the soul of the city, whose undulating terrain he mapped out in *Cities of God*.³ For Ward, this reading of the signs of the times is not simply a matter of theoretical contemplation, nor is it primarily an intellectual program; on the contrary, as a work of hope it is a kind of laboring that dares to imagine new possibilities for Christian living. That is to say, political discipleship, for Ward, is necessarily bound up with a politics and a poetics of Christian action.

Beginning with an extremely significant “Proviso” that highlights the essential precariousness of any attempt to discern the truth of one’s own vision, Ward claims that he is “offering a *description* of social and cultural interactions, the pasts and projected futures and the dreams and ideologies that inform them.”⁴ This way of putting the matter is important because it highlights the fact that while Ward develops the lineaments of a metaphysics consonant with a traditional Catholic analogical worldview, he does not ontologize his diagnosis of the multiple flows of history constitutive of the global city. Evidence of this is that Ward offers his description in the hope that it might provoke other descriptions, perhaps especially those that may elicit productive tensions with his own, and thereby “invites and encourages contestation (22).” To be sure, this recovery of contestation, or what he elsewhere refers to, following Giorgio Agamben, as the fostering of “communit[ies] of dispute (180),” is at the heart of Ward’s project and is, moreover, nuanced and embodied in the text itself. One way to see how this works is by reading Ward’s analysis through the lens of his engagement with the German jurist Carl Schmitt. In his analysis of the active forms of depoliticization characteristic of our present postdemocratic condition Ward makes common cause with Schmitt, who diagnosed the eclipse of the political and castigated the paralyzing effects of individualistic liberalism. However, Ward’s use of Schmitt is subtle and in no way endorses the Hobbesian political ontology of *bellum omnium contra omnes* that underwrites Schmitt’s

³ Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁴ Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 17. Italics added. All subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the body of the text.

thinking. For while Schmitt might be inclined to agree with Ward's analysis that the language of postmodernity is tantamount to a "critique from an angry dog without teeth (75)," his avowed decisionism is at odds with the kind of contestation Ward seeks to enact, as well as the common cause he endeavors to forge "so that we theologians—Christian, Jewish, and Islamic—might make better peacemakers (23)." This productive use of tensions is characteristic of Ward's work and continues in his analysis of the processes of globalization and the new visibility of religion that, alongside his reflections on democracy, form the first part of the book. Central here is a focus on the power of myth that owes a great deal to the work of Georges Sorel. As Ward explains, "globalism is a myth formed out of the universalisms of Christianity (107)" and "as a myth, it governs and generates cultural imaginings; it fashions hopes, beliefs, dreams, and desires. Thus despite the counterfactual evidence of globalization's 'achievements'...the imaginative power of such a myth remains socially and culturally determinative. It enables us to forget (108)."

If the first part of Ward's analysis is concerned with "unmasking the theological and metaphysical sources of current mythologies and revealing the distortions and perversions of their current secularized forms (165)," then the second part can be read as a kind of alternative myth-making critically aware of the states of amnesia in which we are always already embroiled. Given the fact that Ward excavates the operative "secular eschatologies (72)" at work in the global city, it should come as little surprise that the theological framework he employs takes its cue from Johann Baptist Metz. The manner in which Ward differentiates what he calls the "eschatological remainder" from Metz's work is again evidence of his productive use of tensions and is particularly instructive because it points to a "messianism operative now (170)" that moves beyond the *theologia negativa* of Metz's vision by theologically reconfiguring Giorgio Agamben's concept of the remnant. Of paramount importance for Ward is that the eschatological remainder informs and empowers Christian action, such that the politics of discipleship is not a simply a matter of an *imitatio Christi*—although that is certainly part of the complexity Ward recommends—but also a matter of formation *en Christō*. This complex co-abiding is at the root of the essentially

vulnerable ecclesiology that attempts to resist the development of “a new class of slaves, laboring for minimum-level wages in the multiplicity of service industries, and a new class of somnambulists surfeited with shopping and anesthetized with entertainment (220),” which are the products of the echoes of transcendence that reverberate through the contemporary global city.

For Ward, this resistance depends upon the construction of “a good metaphysics of the body, of bodies made heavy with meaning (223).” However it is here that Ward takes an interesting turn, since he wants to “disrupt the privilege of the physical body (227)” by developing a metaphysics of the body not Christologically, but rather by examining the crisis of the body politic in Hegel and St. Paul. This turn is curious, given Ward’s earlier development of a kind of phenomenological Christology that attempts to tell the story of the body of Jesus Christ differently, and that explicitly acknowledges that all accounts of such difference must necessarily remain open to correction, critique, and supplementation.⁵ However, he wonders whether beginning with the human body doesn’t capitulate, at least to some extent, to “modern individualism (226),” and in this way Ward proceeds with Agamben, who likewise identifies a problematic privileging of the physical body as the new subject of politics.⁶ At least part of Ward’s worry seems to be a desire to avoid a reductive materialism that fetishizes the physical body as an object and thereby paradoxically risks just the sort of dematerialization he wants to avoid. Given his subsequent description of St. Paul’s metaphysics of the body politic, however, it is not at all clear why beginning with the body of Christ would necessarily end up in the dissolution of the body itself. Perhaps even more to the point, if “the body of Christ reveals the densest mode of all embodiment (227),” as Ward claims, then might not a metaphysics of the body of Christ prove beneficial for enacting such a body? Indeed, I would suggest that a great deal of Ward’s earlier volume on *Christ and Culture* can helpfully be read as a Christological companion to his narration of the metaphysics of the body politic that already embryonically anticipates the

⁵ See Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 159-78.

⁶ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), especially 123-25.

theo-political trajectory of his politics of discipleship without privileging individual bodies as such. One way Ward accomplishes this is by emphasizing the ongoing perichoretic inflections of the body of Christ and the mystery of all embodiment, which points toward a participation of the human in the divine that is itself a political act unfolding in a space of doxology where voice is given to mystery.⁷ Despite his explicit reconsideration of beginning with the physical body, even if it is the body of Jesus of Nazareth, Ward's hesitation is perhaps best understood as a supplementation or reconfiguration of his earlier Christology that endeavors to be more responsive and responsible to its contemporary context. After all, his twin development of an eschatological humanism and an eschatological ecclesiology in no way rescinds his earlier Christological reflections on the politics of redemption, but rather aims, in Paul's language, "to put the *sōma* back into the *sarx* (225)."

The consequences Ward draws from his foregoing reflections lead him to develop an understanding of the apophatic body of Christ that "appears only in the recollection of events in which it is enacted (258)." Making a connection to what Charles Taylor calls "a network of ever different relations of agape,"⁸ the church, for Ward, exists in the concrete practices that restore the body—that is, in such practices as welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, taking care of the sick, and visiting those in prison (Matt. 25:31-40). This move is significant because it allows Ward to disrupt a certain uncritical privileging of the visible church, which is never without spot or wrinkle, and to avoid the inevitable depoliticization that accompanies too liquid a conception of the church. Perhaps even more significant, this narration of the apophatic body of Christ explodes any tidy distinction between inside and outside, since "those who act and those who are the recipients of such action are all incorporated into Christ, in an eternal reciprocity of giver and given that begins with the asymmetrical sacrifice of Christ himself and sheers off into the intratrinitarian

⁷ See Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 175-78. This kind of politics of redemption is developed throughout *Christ and Culture* and fills out the Christology Ward does not provide as robustly in *The Politics of Discipleship*.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 282.

nature of God's own being (260).” The intriguing suggestion looming in the background here is that the subtle and significant narratives that have been woven as to whether the gift can be given by the likes of Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, and John Milbank need to be supplemented by an inquiry into the reception of the gift. Indeed, Ward sees political discipleship as inextricably bound up with a capacity to receive the gift.

Concluding with a plea to revisit theocratic language that now needs to be retrieved from the dustbin of history, Ward returns us to where he began: to a theological recovery of contestation. The kind of contested space Ward seeks to open up and inhabit, however, is not simply, or even primarily, an agonistic one, as if the recommendation to rethink theocracy is offered to provoke reactions from those who endorse some determinate democratic polity or other. No, the space Ward opens carries with what Hans Urs von Balthasar calls the “interplay of veiling and unveiling.”⁹ So while his account of political discipleship resolutely refuses to proclaim that “Jesus loves democracy (262),” for example, it is no less committed to practically enacting the body of Christ. In fact, at least part of what Ward's argument is designed to do is to unsettle the common assumption that even a careful and limited theological endorsement of some existing form of polity that is judged to be particularly well suited to the present moment is required. This is not to imply that such accounts, like Oliver O'Donovan's nuanced case for democracy,¹⁰ are somehow wrongheaded, but rather to recognize the dangers of linking the politics of discipleship too closely to any determinate polity. Indeed, Ward's provocative suggestion is that the recovery of contestation may well be more helpful because it is “a manifestation of the liveliness of civil society and a refusal of the zero degree dialectic that depoliticization encourages (299).”

Unfortunately, Ward does not elaborate in great detail about the form his recovery of contestation would need to take to empower the politics of

⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I: Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), 206.

¹⁰ See Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), especially 164-210.

discipleship he has in mind, yet he does end with a few enticing intimations, only one of which I will draw out here. The most interesting of these, I would suggest, can be seen in Ward's linkage of the apocalyptic character of his proposal with the explicit acknowledgement that "contestation is not war (299)." The kind of contestation that Ward seeks to open up in the space between veiling and unveiling, then, promulgates no politics of despair. Quite to the contrary, the kind of contestation Ward envisages is underwritten by transformative practices of hope. In this way, Ward's development of the politics of discipleship bears a strong resemblance to that of John Howard Yoder. In particular, I would suggest that Ward's recovery of contestation can be understood as a form of what Yoder calls "peace with eschatology."¹¹ Despite the fact that Ward is much less clear than Yoder about a commitment to a particular kind of pacifism, his avowed apophatism proceeds in a kindred ambiance with Yoder by disrupting any fusion of the body of Christ with a determinate polity. In this way, Ward's recovery of contestation is itself a manifestation of the kind of divine patience that Yoder was at pains to emphasize, and may well illuminate resources for dismantling the violences that accompany "the forces of dehumanization, dematerialization and depoliticization (300)." At the very least, this is the promise and the hope Ward strives to articulate.

In the end, however, this is not a solitary activity, and it is no small merit that Ward is able to embody this conviction in the text itself, for in so doing *The Politics of Discipleship* represents a significant contribution that aims to provoke constructive responses that will in turn reconfigure the theological imaginary he delineates. Thus Ward's latest offering is an invitation to join him: "forget tea and sandwiches with the vicar; there is a genuine struggle here (33)."

¹¹ John Howard Yoder, "Peace Without Eschatology?," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 143-167.