

## Book Reviews

Brian Gregor. *A Philosophical Anthropology of the Cross: The Cruciform Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. 278 pages.

We are living in the golden age of Bonhoeffer research and theology, with the recently completed publication of the complete works of Bonhoeffer from Fortress Press, and the publication of two major biographies from Eric Metaxas and Charles Marsh. In this landscape, we find this significant and innovative work from Brian Gregor, now professor of philosophy at Cal State Dominguez Hills, which seeks to articulate, via Bonhoeffer, a philosophy of self that “is transformed by the cross, rather than transforming the cross” (1). Gregor seeks to deal with the cross as it comes to us, à la Luther’s theology of the cross, which often is co-opted neatly into various schools of philosophy. Instead, Gregor is interested in how “a cruciform philosophy would not be an impervious, dogmatic philosophy but a faith that seeks understanding in fear and trembling rather than

triumph. What would it look like to think philosophically after the cross?” (12). Into this project, Gregor creates a dialogue between Bonhoeffer and Paul Ricoeur, using Bonhoeffer as a corrective to Ricoeur’s own mutations of the cross.

Gregor begins Part 1 by laying out the idea that modern conceptions of self should be held in suspicion by both philosophy and theology, arguing that the modern self is in bondage to seeking its own justifying principles.

Instead of the ancient ideas of the self as mainly understood in action and relation, the self is now understood “as a noun . . . As a result the modern picture of the self is an egocentric, isolated, ahistorical, disembodied, and disengaged thinking subject” (21). Here, Gregor outlines the various modern approaches to what he calls “hermeneutics of self,” looking at Nietzsche, Charles Taylor, and Emmanuel Levinas, as well as at Luther’s and Kierkegaard’s approaches from a theological perspective. Closing the first half, Gregor takes an extremely Lutheran turn, bringing Bonhoeffer (and Luther) to the fore, arguing that the modern concept

of self, one that is self-justifying, is actually just an old formulation of Luther’s *cor curvum in se*, the heart turned in on itself. For Bonhoeffer, the cross is not something to be comprehended, something to fit within an existing philosophical framework, but instead is destructive. Concerning Bonhoeffer’s view, Gregor writes that “the cross destroys the self-justifying ego, putting it to death” (81). The self, for Bonhoeffer, finds its answer in Christ, in the possibility that “the *Logos* is a person, who was born as a human being in history, was crucified and resurrected, thereby inaugurating a new humanity and a new creation” (100).

Part 2 seeks to deal with Christ as the answer to the modern anthropological crisis by drawing on Bonhoeffer’s idea of the penultimate. It is this fairly complex Bonhoefferian idea of the ultimate and penultimate, Gregor believes, that gives grounding to a conception of self that is both truly free and justified. For Bonhoeffer, ultimate events constitute eschatology—that is, the event of justification, judgment, and reconciliation—in “the

proclamation of the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Christ . . . along the lines of Tillich's notion of ultimate concern" (113). Whereas the penultimate, following Luther's idea that humans are not able to freely make decisions concerning ultimate matters, is concerned with "matters below," concerns that are in the spectrum of human ability, like "justice, peace, human dignity, and human flourishing" (117). As Gregor points out, penultimate concerns do not justify, but are indispensable and necessary as the works and proclamation of faith.

In closing the book, Gregor brings Paul Ricoeur into conversation with Bonhoeffer, arguing that a genuine philosophy of self that takes seriously the scandal of the cross is one in which humans are free to simply *be human*. For Ricoeur, religion and religious discourse are about regaining human contact with the ultimate, with the symbols and meanings of the divine. In contrast with Bonhoeffer, as Gregor points out, Ricoeur sees no absolute necessity for a bodily resurrection, but simply that the meaning of the resurrection lives on. In the end, even Ricoeur's philosophy ends up evading the cross, becoming a sort of Docetism, in Gregor's view, and it is only Bonhoeffer's anthropology and soteriology that can offer a corrective. As Gregor argues, it is Bonhoeffer's conception that "God confronts human beings not merely in their weakness but in their penultimate strength and ability, so Christian faith is a Yes

to the capable human being—to maturity, strength, knowledge, and goodness," which reflects an adequate philosophy of self in conversation with the scandal of the cross (180).

In a time of concern regarding Lutheran theological vocabulary around sanctification, Gregor's work represents a monumental step forward in articulating an anthropology and vocabulary for sanctification that is adequate for these ruptured postmodern times. In particular, it is Gregor's retrieval of the idea of the ultimate and penultimate in Bonhoeffer, with Luther, that enables a path forward for articulating what Lutherans really think about what happens, to borrow from N. T. Wright, "after you believe." Gregor's work with Bonhoeffer in this area is nimble and accessible, but also lays out just how humanity's being limited to acting in these penultimate concerns is supremely good news! Instead of being responsible for our own justification, for our own humanity and existence, Bonhoeffer argues that humans become selves precisely in being free to be concerned with human concerns. Instead of grasping at straws in securing and justifying our fleeting existence, Gregor articulates a view of what it means to be a human in the broader Lutheran tradition: "to live a genuinely human, worldly life—to 'eat, drink, sleep, work, celebrate, and play' with vigor" (147–48). Instead of living with terror-stricken consciences, wondering whether it is okay to be human and experience

human emotion in the midst of constant and urgent demands, Gregor argues that Bonhoeffer's (via Luther) conception of selfhood allows for genuinely good human flourishing and existence.

While Gregor's knowledge and engagement with continental philosophers is clear and wide-ranging, I think further engagement with Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida would have been helpful. While Gregor does have a fair amount of engagement with Levinas in the book, particularly in his section on the responsibility of the self, it seems that Levinas may help to illuminate further some of Bonhoeffer's more important points regarding selfhood and responsibility, particularly Bonhoeffer's idea that one of the penultimate concerns of human flourishing is the vicarious life—something that Andrew Root at Luther Seminary has been working on—where the responsibility for the neighbor is the defining characteristic of a christologically oriented humanity. In addition, Derrida receives little treatment, despite Gregor's use of concepts like giving and the gift, particularly when he closes the book writing: "the promise of the resurrection follows the logic of the gift: it is unconditional, and it opens a genuine futurity and new creativity" (198). It would have been interesting to see Gregor wrestle these two into further conversation with Bonhoeffer.

In the end, *A Philosophical Anthropology of the Cross* represents one of the first major Lutheran

engagements with continental philosophy, and an excellent one at that. While the book is certainly not accessible to the layperson, it is accessible to pastors and teachers, and gives a helpful overview of the connections between major figures in continental philosophy and the trajectory of Bonhoeffer's philosophical and theological project. Most importantly, it is a valuable contribution at an important time that begins a conversation of depth about both philosophy that is engaged with the scandal of the cross, as well as a robust Lutheran vocabulary of sanctification.

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Beth Felker Jones. *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2014. 256 pages.

Beth Felker Jones' book, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically*, is both a thorough and engaging text designed to introduce undergraduate students to the key doctrines of the Christian faith. Jones covers a good deal of theological territory in a very accessible manner. Doctrines covered include: revelation and Scripture, trinitarian theology, creation and providence, theological anthropology, Christology, soteriology,

pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

Jones does not, however, merely teach doctrine but tries to draw students into an engagement with the content of the faith in a way that is intended to move them from the realm of intellectual assent to a response of faith. In other words, Jones' book is an invitation for students not simply to learn *about* the Christian faith but to put that faith into practice. *Practicing Christian Doctrine* is unashamedly evangelical, taking a "self-consciously mediating position between liberalism on the one side and separatist fundamentalism on the other" (7).

At the same time, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* seeks to be ecumenical. Jones focuses primarily on areas of agreement across the broad spectrum of the Christian church, not on areas of division or distinction. In doing this she draws on a wide range of voices—male and female, contemporary and classical—from around the globe. The text is also ecumenical in that, though it is not explicitly a study of the Nicene Creed, the text self-consciously upholds a trinitarian understanding of Christian doctrine developed in the Ecumenical Councils of the fourth and fifth centuries.

The ecumenical focus of the book is one of its greatest strengths. Students are exposed to a much wider variety of Christian thinkers than would be expected from an introductory text. This is great for students with a broad (though perhaps

shallow) knowledge of history, but it also can be a source of confusion to those students who are less well read and/or who are unchurched. For example, in affirming the doctrine of God's impassibility Jones references Augustine, David Bentley Hart, and the hymn "Great is Thy Faithfulness" in a single paragraph (126). Similarly, throughout the text Jones deftly weaves Scripture into doctrinal discussions. On the whole this makes for a beautiful text, but there are places where the "extra" voices (whether the voice of Scripture, a theologian, hymnody, or poetry) unnecessarily complicate the doctrinal statements.

Another strength of this book, as a class text, is the clarity with which Jones explains rather complex concepts. This is particularly the case in the chapters on the Trinity (Chapter 3), Christology (Chapter 6), and soteriology (Chapter 7). Not only does Jones make clear the connection between these chapters/doctrines, but the explanations of the various trinitarian heresies (and more importantly, *why* they were deemed heretical) are thorough and yet accessible to students. Jones' explanation of Nestorianism and what is at stake theologically is among the best I have read (129-130).

Likewise, Jones' handling of the relationship between justification and sanctification is brilliant (151-52). In order to explain how Christians navigate the narrow space between works righteousness and antinomianism

she suggests that there is a conceptual (not necessarily temporal) pause between justification and sanctification. This idea of pause helps students grapple both with questions of personal salvation and growth in holiness as well as with questions of theodicy.

The level of clarity and depth in the book is, however, a bit uneven. As an evangelical scholar Jones does not handle the theology of the sacraments—particularly the Eucharist—as well as she does many other doctrinal topics. And, unfortunately, Jones misrepresents the Lutheran understanding of the sacrament, claiming that Lutherans believe in consubstantiation. This is a claim often made *about* Lutheran theology, rarely *by* Lutheran theologians. Instead of consubstantiation Lutherans speak of Christ's real presence in a sacramental union is a way of explain *what* the Eucharist is without offering a philosophical explanation of precisely what this means or how this happens.

The text also reflects some evangelical concerns that may be of little interest to readers from mainline traditions. For example, in speaking of the authority of Scripture Jones offers a rather nuanced distinction between inerrancy and infallibility. But for traditions that reject *both* notions of inerrancy and infallibility (and speak instead of the inspiration of Scripture) this is a distinction that is likely to confuse students.

Similarly, in addressing the doctrine of creation, Jones argues for the compatibility of

science and theology, of evolution and creation. Her argument is predicated on the claim that “Christian thought has no problem with scientific theories about how creation works, but it cannot bear the idolatry of scientism” (81). Jones' handling of the relationship between science and faith is good; however, it reflects a certain evangelical sensibility that is not necessarily shared in the broader Christian community, and it omits any possibility of reading the Genesis narrative in a non-literal manner.

Gendered language is another area in which Jones reflects a certain evangelical sensibility that may not be appreciated by all. In a time when most mainline institutions (and a number of Bible translations) have made a concerted effort to emphasize gender-inclusive language for God, Jones continues to use—and argue for the use of—primarily masculine language for God. While Jones acknowledges that gendered language for God is problematic (though she does not offer an explanation as to *how* such language is problematic), she argues that “masculine personal pronouns are the *least* problematic” (174).

Overall *Practicing Christian Doctrine* is a very good text. It covers a good deal of theological territory in a nuanced and accessible manner. Because of its focus on not merely teaching but forming disciples it may be less appropriate for use in “Religious Studies” programs and well-suited for use in evangelical “Religion” programs. This focus

on discipleship does not, in any way, lessen the intellectual rigor of the text, but it does, both explicitly and implicitly, assume a particular evangelical telos. *Practicing Christian Doctrine* is an excellent text to use in an institutional setting that shares the evangelical commitments of the author.

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Ted Peters. *UFOs: God's Chariots?—Spirituality, Ancient Aliens, and Religious Yearnings in the Age of Extraterrestrials*. Pompton Plains, N.J.: New Page Books, 2014. 320 pages

David Hume writes in *The Natural History of Religion*, “But where the gods are conceived to be only a little superior to mankind . . . we are more at our ease, in our addresses to them, and may even, without profaneness, aspire sometimes to a rivalry and emulation of them.” Hume's words resonate with particular relevance as one reads Ted Peter's new, revised version of *UFOs: God's Chariots?—Spirituality, Ancient Aliens, and Religious Yearnings in the Age of Extraterrestrials*. As Peters demonstrates, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have presented an abundance of interest in the related topics of UFOs, aliens, and extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI). In many cases, alien sightings and stories of abduction have been interpreted as encounters with a

more perfect species, a collective of beings similar and superior to humans who, by virtue of their developmental superiority, can relay beneficial knowledge to earthlings. Are these higher entities the gods of today's science-infused culture, inspiring us to seek our own perfection and emulation of them?

The core argument of Peters' book remains as it was for his original 1977 edition: "The UFO phenomenon exposes a widespread cultural tendency to translate traditional religious or spiritual sensibilities into scientific or materialist language and categories" (13). The method employed for substantiating this thesis is to "bring the tools of a scholar of religion and a theologian to bear so that we can see that this is the case" (12). Additionally, Peters endeavors to elucidate the limitations of a purely scientific perspective on what he consistently calls "the UFO phenomenon," to show how religious/spiritual sensibilities receive symbolic expression in UFO accounts, and to offer advice on how this data might be understood from the standpoint of faith in God.

Separated into twelve chapters, *UFOs: God's Chariots?* attempts to achieve the above objectives by illuminating and discussing four categories ("models") into which data from the field of UFO investigation seem to fall: 1) The Interstellar Diplomat, 2) The Research Scientist, 3) The Celestial Savior, and 4) The Hybridizer. Peters suggests that accounts of alien

encounters as well as the approaches of various investigators in the field of space science can be placed into these four conceptual forms, the delineating factor being the supposed motivations driving the actions of the extraterrestrials. In other words, the account of one alien encounter might include language that intimates that the aliens are visiting earth in order to conduct advanced scientific experiments; thus, such an account would fall into the "Research Scientist" model. In another instance, the abductee might insinuate or explicitly indicate that their abductor conveyed supreme knowledge that has the potential to set humanity on a path toward perfection, world peace, or some other hopeful state. Such a notion would place the encounter firmly within the "Celestial Savior" category.

These four models, however, are not simply arbitrary. Peters notes that he has arrived at these classifications through a phenomenological process, interpreting the interpretations of those involved in the UFO phenomenon. With an awareness of hermeneutics and an obvious indebtedness to both Edmund Husserl and Mircea Eliade, Peters keenly highlights the importance of distinguishing subject from object before, ultimately, analyzing the interpretive structures of the former. The reader is informed that those structures of consciousness—or in this case, those models of alien encounters—have been derived from extensive study of the

major figures and thoughts in the field of UFO investigation. Of course, Peters supplements his discussion of these four types with ample coverage of the historical changes in accounts of alien abduction, demonstrating that, for example, early accounts of the 1950s often contained a political component in which the UFO was piloted by an other-worldly diplomat who demanded, "Take me to your leader," while accounts from the 1980s often included aliens impregnating abductees without consent or concern.

In many ways, the phenomenology put to work in *UFOs: God's Chariots?* is its greatest strength. By broadening the scope of his analysis to include not only reports of sightings and abduction but also the approaches and conclusions of those investigators involved in the field itself, Peters is able to discuss illuminating and intriguing elements of the topic such as the recurrence of religious motifs instead of involving himself in hackneyed debates over the "truth" of UFOs and aliens or the credibility of hypnosis for retrieving memories. That being said, the phenomenology of religion has a distinct history of attempting to harmonize Kantian epistemology and Christian faith, and Peters' book sometimes fails to dodge that particular bullet. When Peters' commitment to religious belief is combined with his conclusion that UFOs mask humanity's religious hopes in more "respectable" scientific packaging,

the result is almost a sort of neo-gnosticism (a criticism Peters makes of the UFO phenomenon itself) in which UFO science is just an example of humans seeking reunion with the “source of light” (22). The reader can become confused, in some instances, as to whether such an interpretation stems from the phenomenological framework or the a priori theism of the author.

This tension is also manifest in Peters’ use of the term “symbols” for religious allusions, themes, or parallels in alien abduction accounts. Phenomenologically, symbols function as conveyors of meaning for the insiders, but Peters tends (though not in every instance) to mean that he can discern religious imagery or notions in the accounts, *as an outside observer*. Also of note is the recurring interchangeability of the terms “religious” and “spiritual” as well as the repeated use of “religious” for concepts or structures that are overtly Christian, such as salvation and redemption.

It should be noted, however, that these shortcomings do not rob the book of value and that they undoubtedly stem from Peters’ own goal of applying the tools of a “scholar of religion” and a “theologian” to the topic at hand. *UFOs: God’s Chariots?* succeeds in shedding light on the religious undercurrents of much of the UFO culture and applies a steady, careful hand to a topic regularly crushed by heavy fists. Furthermore, many of the book’s arguments are conveyed convincingly,

such as the assertion that in our society “science is buying out religion, but science continues to sell religion’s products, such as salvation” (175). In the end, the volume concludes with an intriguing chapter in which Peters defines astrotheology, utilizes the ontological argument for God against those who postulate that our creator was an alien, and introduces global warming as the new stimulus for the search for hope from beyond our own planet—a chapter, one might say, that mimics our expansive universe by begging for further exploration.

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James K. A. Smith. *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014. 152 pages.

*How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* by James K. A. Smith is an extremely well-written book that has as its chief aim introducing Charles Taylor’s very impressive and highly nuanced *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), in which Taylor focuses on a single problem: How is it that in the sixteenth century, it was impossible for most people not to believe in God, while in the late twentieth century it is not only possible not to believe in God, but it is problematic, and for many, impossible to believe in God? To

answer this question Taylor argues that we not only have to define what it means to be secular, we must also engage in a long, detailed, and complicated intellectual history to show how we got to the Secular Age.

Taylor is Roman Catholic, and Smith is Reformed. Neither, however, is engaged in what traditionally might be described as apologetics (120). Rather, they both are interested in cultural and personal understanding. This requires a sophisticated and, at times, detailed journey into intellectual history. Smith, however, is not writing just for scholars. He aspires to make the vast sweep of Taylor’s analysis available to “practitioners,” those living in this cultural moment who feel the “cross pressures and fragilization” that characterize our age on an existential level. His is a book for both believers and atheists. Smith’s soundtrack, as he says, is Arcade Fire, U2, and Death Cab for Cutie. Taylor’s soundtrack is more likely Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner.

To accomplish the task Taylor sets out for himself, he introduces several new concepts that Smith conveniently defines in a glossary at the end of his book. Most people do not have coherent philosophical theories, but we have *social imaginaries*, which is the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings. In the sixteenth century, these imaginaries included images, stories, legends, etc. that described the world as being both immanent and

transcendent, with the boundaries between the immanent and transcendent being porous rather than closed. The spiritual world, both good and evil, was real, external to our minds, and could affect our daily lives. Society was governed by a transcendent order and conception of the good. The modern mind, on the other hand, is characterized by *buffered selves* that are not subject to invasive destructive or constructive spiritual influences external to our own personal internal mental states (28–30).

Taylor describes the modern moral order as founding morality on the organization of society for the mutual benefit of all (greatest good for the greatest number?) rather than on some higher or eternal norms. The proper goal for individuals is expressive individualism—each one of us is obligated to achieve his or her own individual identity. This is the age of authenticity. Believers and non-believers alike are attracted to this imaginary, but exclusive humanists affirm that this authenticity can be achieved without appeal to any transcendent power. The result of this is the *nova effect*, or the explosion of world-views that leads to fragilization and cross-pressures. We live in a disenchanted world of multiple options. We are cross-pressured in a way that the inhabitants of the sixteenth century were not. In this sense, the firm orthodox believer lives in a secular age as much as the exclusive humanist. One knows that there are options, and one's faith is chal-

lenged by the media, colleagues at work, and all sorts of messages from the surrounding culture. Ordinary citizens and not just intellectual and cultural elites are confronted by alternative imaginaries. This cross pressure is not a one-way street. Modern humans are disconcerted by the "malaises of immanence." Exclusive humanists wonder if there is not something more, "that with the eclipse of the transcendent, something may have been lost" (64–65). "There is a fundamental discomfort with materialistic reductionism" (104). Thus, modern humans are caught in a cross-pressured world. Neither the believer nor the non-believer can live in complete comfort.

Taylor's Roman Catholicism does not seem simply to follow his apologetic approach, which points more to a feeling than a strictly rational defense of the faith. He first of all sets out to show that the construal of exclusive humanism is just that—a construal. It is an interpretation of reality that is not a logically necessary one. It has certain unresolved dilemmas. Christianity, especially in its incarnational Roman Catholic form (as distinct from Protestantism in its excarnational form), is also a construal that presents us with certain dilemmas. The apologetic task for both Christian faith and exclusive humanism is to argue which has the most adequate perspective to provide a meaningful view of human existence (120). Christianity can do a better job of naming and thus

helping us deal with (not dispel) "the specter of meaningless" that haunts our age (128–9).

What Taylor means by "secular" is distinct from some other possible meanings of the term. He is not talking about (1) the retreat of religion in public life, or (2) the decline in belief and practice, but rather (3) the change in the conditions of belief (*A Secular Age*, 423). Definitions (1) and (2) may be closely related to (3). But in our secular age, as Taylor defines it, for the first time in history exclusive humanism is a widespread option, and Christians live in the consciousness of exclusive humanism as an option. "We don't believe instead of doubting; we believe while doubting. We're all Thomas now" (4). On the other hand, exclusive humanists live in the consciousness of the possibility of belief in God. "The wager of this book—like the gambit of Taylor's *Secular Age*—is that most of us live in this cross-pressured space, where both our agnosticism and our devotion are mutually haunted and haunting" (4).

I close this review with high praise, some criticism, and some reservations. I read Taylor's 850-page *A Secular Age* twice through before reading Smith. Nonetheless, I find Smith's exposition extremely helpful. He has done a masterful job. I recommend his book highly to those who are already familiar with Taylor and those who seek a competent introduction. Pastors as much as "new atheists" should read Smith's book. However, Taylor

writes about the intellectual history of Western Europe and North America. We live in a global world that includes not only the Near and Far East but South America and Africa. Of course, we affect these other regions, but as we interact they also affect us. This is not to criticize Taylor for not enormously expanding the scope of his work, but a more modest title (*A Secular Age: Western Europe*

*and North America??*) might be in order.

Even with respect to the United States I have some reservations. Taylor and Smith seem to me to be making expansive sociological claims, which might be confirmed or refuted by sociological data. I personally know both believers and non-believers who don't seem to be cross-pressured or haunted by either faith or exclusive humanism. Yet

Smith introduces his book to places like Brooklyn, Berkeley, and Boulder—all fairly liberal cities. What about the smaller towns of the South? Are we really all Thomas, or is that just a slice of the academy and population? Is it clear how (not) to be secular in spaces far from Smith's milieu?

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