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Hopeful Realism: Reclaiming the Poetry of Theology

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Recommended Citation

Love, Gregory Anderson PhD, "Hopeful Realism: Reclaiming the Poetry of Theology" (2001). *Our House Articles, Posters, and Presentations*. 347.

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THE
PRINCETON
SEMINARY
BULLETIN

VOLUME XXII NUMBER 2 NEW SERIES 2001

Stephen D. Crocco, EDITOR
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Midgley's opening essay outlines an argument, presumably on behalf of the theological believer in human responsibility, that science, whether biological or cultural, does not entail fatalism. Several subsequent essays also critique "determinist" readings of biological research. Psychologist F. Watts reviews relevant scientific literature showing the intertwining of biological and social aspects of personal life and suggests its coherence with theological claims. H. Lagercrantz, Professor of Pediatrics, sketches how a child's brain develops and briefly refutes neurogenetic determinism. In a programmatic essay theologian P. Hefner outlines a theological understanding of persons as emergent, as "what the human body/brain can become" in the context of a network of relations with the world, other persons, and God. In an especially strong essay that concludes Part 1 theologian M. Welker develops a careful analysis and acute critique of European modernity's concept of "autonomous person," a concept on which some of the earlier essayists arguably trade.

The essays in Part 2 address a second theme, "Supervenience, Mind, and Culture." The notion of "supervenience" posits "levels" of process and activity in human being, such that "higher," truly personal levels "supervene" on lower biologically explainable levels without conflict with or reduction to them. Philosopher D. Bielfeldt develops a rigorous and sophisticated critique of the idea of supervenience. Gregersen develops an ingenious philosophical-theological "holistic" alternative to conventional physicalist notions of supervenience. Psychologist J. Teske's essay concludes the volume with the thesis that the human spirit, meaning our capacity to apprehend meanings and purposes beyond our individual lives, is a social and historical construction, not determined by neuropsychology, and is embedded in evolutionary processes. Uncertainty whether this thesis is an alternative to or a variant of "supervenience" may be an indication of the slipperiness of the latter.

David H. Kelsey
Yale Divinity School

Ottati, Douglas F. *Hopeful Realism: Reclaiming the Poetry of Theology*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1999. Pp. 134. \$14.95.

In an American society in which the mainline churches have lost much of their cultural status, many pastors and laypeople are tempted to pull the church inward, toward a self-enclosed community of faith or toward a privatized spirituality. Reflecting the best of the Reformed tradition, Ottati insists that the church must engage its culture, being open to that culture's insights on truth, and challenge culture toward reform.

Hopeful Realism is a collection of six public addresses and one redraft of a

previously published essay. The settings range from a convocation at Macalester College to adult education classes at Presbyterian churches and a Presbytery ministers' retreat. Two themes, presented in the first two chapters, run throughout the seven essays.

Chapter 1 presents the author's substantive argument that the church must challenge its culture. American culture is dominated by a social Darwinist vision of reality. Life, in all its facets, is a game, and the goal is to win. Leadership training in business, culture, and beyond celebrates this mythology of ceaseless competition and seeks to hone skills that will give a person or group the competitive advantage to come out on top. In contrast, popular therapeutic spirituality presents personal growth as the goal of life. Reducing all of life to either a competition or private gratification is unrealistic. Theology aims through its doctrinal symbols to present an alternative vision of what is most ultimate in life. Compared to our cultural mythology, this Christian vision is more realistic. There are limits to our ability to control our situation, and the competitive world we have created is full of violence, injustices, and failures of relational fidelity. It is also more hopeful. The symbols of creation, providence, and redemption point to traces of God's activity in the world on our behalf. We experience genuine communion at times with others, as persons who exhibit expansive generosity and responsibility.

Chapter 2 presents the author's methodological claim. If the Christian faith is to portray this alternate vision of ultimate reality, theology must regain a poetic understanding of its symbols. Rejecting both literalistic and functionalistic understandings of theological language, Ottati espouses a critical-realist position. As with art and literature, so in theology the images and models explore and interpret, but never entirely capture, the nature of the ultimate reality.

Ottati's chapter on Jesus' resurrection (Chapter 4) exemplifies his theological method. The gospel narratives of the empty tomb and resurrection appearances of Jesus point to core meanings, such as Jesus' continuing presence with the disciples and with us as the living Lord of our life, and the trustworthiness and goodness of God. To the question "What happened?" Ottati claims that whether a resurrection interpretation portrays Jesus' body as physically raised and transformed (so Karl Barth or Stephen Davis), or as pointing to some kind of experience of seeing Jesus after his death (so John Shelby Spong or John Hick), the wide variety of interpretations of what happened on Easter Sunday is acceptable as long as the interpretations convey the core meanings of the event.

Ottati also has an intriguing chapter (Chapter 5) showing implications of

the incarnation for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Luther held that the word and flesh are so united in Jesus that the eternal Logos who is truly manifest in Jesus Christ is universally present and active beyond the man Jesus as well, in the patriarchs and prophets, in nature, and beyond the church.

The great strength of Chapter 5, its detailed discussion of a theological concept, reveals the main weakness in some other chapters. Many of the discussions of the theological doctrines lack depth and detail, hurting the move of their application to culture. I found myself reading all the footnotes, hungry for more than brief discussions and general statements. For example, some use of Robert Bellah, Robert Wuthnow, or Nicholas Wolterstorff might have deepened the author's portrayal of Christianity's "hopeful realism." Ottati's chapter on the Trinity (Chapter 3) makes no mention of the contribution of a social understanding of the relation of the three Persons by such theologians as Jürgen Moltmann, Jean Zizioulas, Elizabeth A. Johnson, or Leonardo Boff. Repetition of sentences or whole paragraphs among essays again gives the impression that we are not moving into deeper ground.

These limitations may be due to the book's nature as a collection of public addresses. Despite these shortcomings, Ottati's chapters on the resurrection and ecumenical dialogue, the vision of hopeful realism, and his understanding of theology as poetic portrayal of reality give pastor and layperson insight into how to think theologically.

Gregory Anderson Love
San Francisco Theological Seminary

Jones, Serene. *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000. Pp. 214. \$17.00.

Serene Jones overlays feminist theory on top of Christian doctrine to show how feminist theory alters the configuration of theology. Defining feminist theory broadly as texts and conversations that share the goal of the liberation of women, she uses it to locate signals that will allow women to enter into the familiar but sometimes alienating terrain of Christian doctrine and to find direction within it. Her aim in this project is not to reconstruct theology. Rather, she reorients it so that it confronts the reality of women's lives. Jones puts it this way: "I like the image of remapping because it captures well the fact that feminist theory's principal contribution to theology lies in analyzing and reorienting the conceptual markers that Christians use to describe the terrain of their faith."

Jones does not approach this project as a disinterested outsider. She invites