

Book Reviews

Oliver O'Donovan, *The Disappearance of Ethics: The Gifford Lectures*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024. ISBN 978-0802883490, 161 pp., hbk \$21, also Kindle.

After a brilliant career spanning more than five decades, Oliver O'Donovan is now recognized as perhaps the foremost Protestant moral theologian living. So when he was invited to give the 2021 Gifford Lectures on the state of the discipline of Christian ethics, scholars and churchmen from around the world tuned in for the occasion. For those who missed the lectures—and more importantly, for all those who want to be able to take their time following the densely-woven strands of his argument—their recent publication is an enormous blessing.

The volume is trademark O'Donovan: the prose may be dense, but it is beautifully crafted and sparkles with witticisms, while a lifetime's worth of erudition lies concealed under the surface, supporting the argument but never drawing attention to itself. That argument is a fitting capstone to a life's work.

Although pessimistically titled *The Disappearance of Ethics*, O'Donovan's work offers a word of good news, of *euangelion*. Indeed, the impoverished state of our ethical discourse, he argues, although the result of specific modern intellectual and spiritual maladies, is simply another manifestation of the Fall, a darkness which the gospel comes to illuminate. The Christian proclamation, then, offers itself to our darkened moral imaginations as the best and fullest answer to the triple crisis of ethics that O'Donovan diagnoses.

This crisis he describes in terms of the triad which will be familiar to readers of his recent *Ethics as Theology* trilogy: a crisis of world (the missing object), of time (the missing frontier), and of self (the missing agent)—in other words, of the three coordinates that render moral experience coherent. First, the idea of a meaningful, ordered, coherent moral field, an objective order of goods within which we are called upon to act, has been dissolved by Kantian interiority and asceticism: if the only thing that is good without qualification is a good will, untainted by considerations of enjoyment, then ethics can no longer “give us an informed and affectionate appreciation of the world's goods, the love of art and the love of friendship” (18). Second, we have lost the temporal horizon that renders our actions meaningful in relation to a definite past and future, as the Christian view of history has dissolved into the eternal flow of nature or the endless manipulability of technique. To act morally, “we need a moral faith, a

belief that the ultimate course of events will in the end prove hospitable to, and vindicate, the efforts of moral life and action” (42), something that modernity no longer provides. Third, we have lost the “unity of the agency that connects us with them and discover ourselves to be not merely creatures of moods and stimuli (though we cannot stop being that) but continuously responsible agents” (73).

To each of these, he argues in the second set of three chapters, Christianity offers a uniquely clear and compelling answer, a word of good news that can restore the foundations of moral experience. First, the Christian concept of creation (richer and more definite than that of “nature,” although O’Donovan is not hostile to talk of “natural law” with appropriate qualifications) offers us a recovery of the objective moral shape of the world we inhabit. Second, the biblical concept of law, he argues in perhaps the book’s most intriguing chapter, gives morality shape within history; the law of God arises out of God’s own activity in history, and human law is the attempt to give order to concrete cultural experiences. Finally, the freedom bestowed by the Spirit offers a redemption, a “justification” of human agency, that “we shall indeed, by his doing, come to be agents who are effective in doing some good” (128).

Alongside this powerful overarching argument for the retrieval of a distinctively Christian ethics are scattered innumerable delightful asides: insights about the corrosive effects of “rights” language, profound reflections on the nature of human free will in relation to divine agency, and much more. Readers will find this a book that repays long reflection and frequent re-reading, an essential resource for any churchman or Christian educator’s bookshelf.

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Aidan Nichols, *Apologia: A Memoir*. Herefordshire, Eng.: Gracewing, 2023. ISBN 978-0852447239, 164 pp., pbk \$19.95.

Aidan Nichols is one of the great stars of Roman Catholic theology of the last thirty years. His new *Apologia: A Memoir* is at once a courageous protest against the heresies of the current pontiff and an encouragement to reformed catholic Anglicans.

Fr. Nichols (a Dominican priest) is nothing if not prolific, having authored forty-six books before this autobiography. He has written separate books on