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'THE TRAJECTORY OF FAITH, LOVE, AND HOPE': RESPONSE TO CHAPTER 6

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At its core, Oliver O'Donovan's *Self, World, and Time* (SWT) is a reflection on God's life as faith, love, and hope intended to illuminate the shape and direction of our life together.¹ O'Donovan provides us with an occasion to see how moral and doctrinal claims interlock, for theology cannot properly be theology if it does not attend to doctrine's inclination to stretch its legs into the actual life of the Christian believer. As a historian of Christian thought and practice, my response will resist a certain inclination to press immediately towards action and will delay for the moment the question 'what's at stake?' In this response, I will, instead, attend to the theological architecture of the book from the angle of the triad of faith, love, and hope that offers a doctrinal structure to O'Donovan's argument and, as we shall see, undergirds the coordination of 'self', 'world', and 'time'.

In chapter six, O'Donovan examines the character of the *relation* between faith, love, and hope. How are they held together as a unity? In the first line of chapter six, O'Donovan cuts off an obvious strategy of finding the unity in just one of the theological virtues (e.g., love as a kind of 'essence' of the triad itself). Instead of this 'essentialist' rendition, O'Donovan prefers a model based on a 'dynamic interplay' between faith, love, and hope. In the words of Tyndale, a fitting mouthpiece for this symposium, 'Because the one is known by the other, it is impossible to know any of them truly, and not be deceived, but *in respect and comparison* of the other.'² Elsewhere, O'Donovan has suggested that the relationship is 'a kind of *communicatio idiomatum*'.³ This seems to reiterate what he left us with at the end of chapter five of SWT:

¹ I am in debt to Rachel Teubner, Joseph Lenow, Matthew Puffer, and Charles Mathewes for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

² Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time. Ethics as Theology 1: An Induction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 105 (my emphasis). Subsequent page references in the text are to this work.

³ 'Faith before Hope and Love', *New Blackfriars* 95.1056 (March 2014), pp. 177-89, quote on p. 181.

Their unity can be expressed by saying that the gift of the *self*, perfected in faith, provides a point of view from which we may understand the *world* as affording us *time to act*; the gift of the *world*, perfected in love, provides a point of view from which we may understand the *self* as laying claim to *its own time*; the gift of *time*, perfected in hope, provides us a point of view from which we may understand the *self* as active *within the world* (103).

As presupposed in this passage, faith, love, and hope map onto self, world, and time respectively. The theological triad should, then, be held together in a manner analogous to that of self, world, and time. Further, we might also expect the epistemic access to be reciprocal as well: to capture the relationship between faith, love, and hope is thus to understand the relation between self, world, and time; and to capture the relationship between self, world, and time is to understand the relation between faith, love, and hope.

While I have some concerns about this way of relating the two triads, which I will return to below, I would like to focus first on the relations within the triads by drawing upon the last section in chapter two ('Ethics and Prayer'). In the tradition of two of his most prized interlocutors, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas,⁴ O'Donovan expounds the Lord's Prayer as a *moral* document, drawing out the references to self, world, and time. The petition, 'Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven', indicates the *world* as the 'scene of God's self-disclosure'; 'Give us this day our daily bread' designates those claims for the care of the *self*; and the petition, 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil' calls to a future *time* (39). In saying the Prayer, we as a community are drawn through the very logic of world, self, and time.

Notice, however, that O'Donovan's ordering has changed. The Lord's Prayer unfolds as world-self-time. Mapping this onto the theological triad, we would have the order love-faith-hope. O'Donovan has argued that the classic order, faith-hope-love, is not the only order attested in Scripture, plumping instead for the order reflected in the title of the book, faith-love-hope (self-world-time).⁵ He exerts considerable energy in Chapter 5 establishing this seemingly minor point because it relates to the structure of Christian action.⁶ The disparate orderings suggest that

⁴ Augustine, *The Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, trans. John J. Jepson, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 5 (New York: Paulist Press, 1948), pp. 100-27. Thomas Aquinas, *The Catechetical Instructions*, trans. Joseph B. Collins (New York: Veritas Splendor Publications, 1939), pp. 247-307.

⁵ *SWT*, pp. 97-103.

⁶ 'We conclude this induction into Ethics as Theology, then, with a journey through the trajectory of this sequence, tracing how the active self expands

O'Donovan is not entirely sure-footed with respect to whether the self or the world, whether faith or love, is the first step for human action. We return to this below.

Crucially, the prayer concludes with a movement toward personal action ('lead us not'). Whereas the preceding petitions evoke action outside of us—your *kingdom* come, your *will* be done, give us this *day*, forgive our *debts*—the final petition draws those who give it voice—the 'we' or 'us' of the prayer—into the action of God. While the prayer begins with the vocative 'Father!'—the cry of dependence that we utter as we are 'pressing forward upon the knees'—it concludes with the promise of a complicated agency—God's *and* our's—that is, upon reflection, already present within the action of genuflection. Indeed, 'Prayer is the form thought takes when we understand that agency implies a relation to the government of the universe, at once cooperative and dependent.' (38-9)

But what kind of unity does the Lord's Prayer have? Two possible loci of this unity come to mind. The first has already been intimated (and is further clarified in chapter three): the community, the 'we' that is found in the prayer (64). The prayer's unity is in the community, the congregation that gives it voice. In a similar vein to how Augustine reads and preaches the Psalms, speaking the prayer in unison effects a kind of unity of the praying community.⁷ The second is derived from the form of the prayer: action or the possibility of agency that proceeds out of the prayer and draws all of its words behind it as a single unifying impulse of the Christian life. As the tip of a spear collects all of the force at one critical point, so too does the concluding petition draw together into action all the other petitions. It appears that O'Donovan is more engaged here with what is at stake in the second, that is, the possibility of agency. Action as the point of unity is emphasized in his discussion of the three 'offices' of faith, love, and hope (100). The unity of faith, love, and hope seems, then, to be of action. The centrality of action comes as no surprise, but how exactly does this square with the 'dynamic interplay' that replaces an essentialist account? For this we must return to chapter six.

For O'Donovan, faith and love are openness, receptivity (112, 119). But they are also related to knowledge. Faith is, on the one hand, a kind of 'knowledge-minus', as O'Donovan puts it, 'a cognitive orientation towards realities that are still uncertain and unclear' (110). This could, perhaps, have been termed 'trust', an epistemic virtue whose value we

into loving knowledge, is narrowed down to action, and finally attains rest in its accomplishment' (SWT, 103).

⁷ For an influential account along these lines, see Rowan Williams, 'Augustine and the Psalms', *Interpretation* 58 (2004), 17-27.

have recently been reminded of by current trends in epistemology.⁸ Love's knowledge, on the other hand, is captured, for O'Donovan, by the term 'admiration': 'the knowledge of what can only be known in love, and the love of what can only be loved in knowledge' (113). This seems to be a kind of 'knowledge-plus'. Between 'knowledge-minus' and 'knowledge-plus' somehow emerges the promise on which hope is grounded. In O'Donovan's words, 'promise allows hope to be born, and through hope opens the way to agency' (122-3).

So what we have here is, I think, yet another triad in trust, admiration, and promise, but one that is a bit closer than the other triads to the stuff of action. But when set within this new triad, I am less convinced by the claim that hope (via its connection with promise) brings agency to effect (122). Whereas O'Donovan finds openness necessary for action in faith and love, it is trust and promise that seem to provide the conditions for *admiration* to draw me forward, pull me to the beautiful, the good, the true. Promises do not propel or effect, they guarantee; they are the substance of a trusting relation, what one party passes to another. But yet when I turn back to the Lord's Prayer, particularly the final petition—'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'—I can see the possibility of agency's ground in hope. This petition has been handed down to us as a petition of hope, and that description is acceptable, but it also points toward action. Thus, I think O'Donovan is right when he says, 'The moment of action is the moment of temptation, when our settled perceptions of the world and ourselves may fail us.' (123) To speak of temptation is to speak of possible courses of action. But is it 'only hope', as he suggests, that 'suffices to address [temptation]' (123)? If the unity of faith, love, and hope are somehow bound up with the 'logic' or form of the Lord's Prayer, we can, perhaps, catch a glimpse of the unity of the triad. But it is ambiguous whether the salutary response is in hope in particular or in the relation between faith, love, and hope. In other words, does hope as the goal—that is, the substance of that for which we hope—simply provide the orientation and thus that which collects faith and love into a unity? Or does hope play a more robust role in the animation of the movement toward action, working in tandem with faith and

⁸ See, e.g., John Greco, 'Testimonial Knowledge and the Flow of Information', in *Epistemic Evaluation*, ed. by John Greco and David Henderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Linda Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy of Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Paul Faulkner, *Knowledge on Trust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

love? A clear answer to this is not offered in *SWT*, so we may have to wait until O'Donovan spells this out more clearly in the forthcoming volumes.

In the meantime, one might want to pose two specific questions. First, I am perplexed by O'Donovan's rejection of essentialism. If action is the unity that draws together the three theological virtues, and it is (nearly) identified with hope, how is this not in effect essentialising hope? Perhaps we should not, after all, give up on the essentialist strategy, provided that it is not one of the theological virtues that becomes the essence (and thereby the true substance) of the others. Rather, could not *desire* provide this golden thread? Desire is not exactly love, but a certain species of love, and neither is it faith nor is it hope, but that without which both faith and love would not even be able to begin the process of discovering a self and a world that are 'co-present' in time. This does not undercut O'Donovan's insight regarding the importance of hope to deliberation, for deliberation must still unfold in time with the promise and expectation of completed action. Rather, it gives us a hook into that which intrinsically motivates humans to look at themselves as persons living in this world. While hope might provide the structure for temporally-extended existence, it does not provide the motivation for action.

Second, O'Donovan suggests that faith, love, and hope also map onto the classical virtues: 'courage with faith, judgment with love, prudence and temperance with hope' (102). Is he thereby implicitly offering us an account of the unity of the virtues that differs both from the classical ('pagan') philosophical varieties and Augustine's and Luther's 'essentialist' strategies, which argue for the centrality of one of the theological virtues to the triad as a whole? O'Donovan's cryptic account leaves unclear what he makes of the classical virtues. In light of his insistence on foregrounding action—action that necessarily takes place in the world, in space and in time that Christians share with non-Christians—O'Donovan would strengthen his proposal if he were to indicate with greater care and precision, and in relation to other proposals throughout the history of Christian thought, how his account might reconfigure the classical virtues. Are non-Christians implicitly relying on the structural unity of the theological virtues when they successfully bring about a life lived according to the classical virtues? Or are the theological virtues necessary to live according to the classical virtues? A great deal has been written about this in recent years by those familiar to O'Donovan, and one wonders what he makes of these other proposals in light of his own innovations in this short volume.⁹ I suspect that O'Donovan wants to reserve a place for the

⁹ See, e.g., Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and Eric Gregory, *Politics of the*

theological that is more than simply one way of talking about the unity of virtues shared with non-Christians. *SWT* is, of course, an incomplete book, as it points to the later promised volumes; my queries are thus tentative. To these questions, I shall be grateful to find answers in O'Donovan's forthcoming volumes.