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BOOK REVIEWS

Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith, by Merold Westphal. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014. 294 pages. \$35.00 (paperback).

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In the past two decades there has been a surge of interest in the concept of love in Søren Kierkegaard's thought. Monographs like M. Jamie Ferreira's *Love's Grateful Striving* (2001) and C. Stephen Evans's *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love* (2004) and collections of essays like the *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (1998) and *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, v.16 (2000), have drawn attention to Kierkegaard's most important book on Christian ethics, *Works of Love*, and located the mother of virtues as a central concept within Kierkegaard's vast authorship.

If there is another theological virtue given equal if not greater airtime in Kierkegaard, it would be faith, and this should come as no surprise when one recognizes Kierkegaard's stated intention of reintroducing Christianity into Christendom. However, there has been less dedicated attention to this concept, despite its prominent place in so many of Kierkegaard's most important writings. In *Fear and Trembling*, one is introduced to the idea of faith as an absolute relation to the absolute. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym paraphrases faith as an objective uncertainty to which one is committed with the utmost passion and inwardness. And in *The Sickness unto Death*, faith, contraposed to despair, is a transparent, restful relation to God.

In Merold Westphal's *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, we find these and other conceptions and nuances of faith carefully articulated, distinguished, and clarified. The book is organized in three sections, each one devoted to the work of one particular pseudonym. The first and largest concerns the lone work of the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio and Kierkegaard's most well-known work, *Fear and Trembling*. Given the depth, breadth, and quality of these chapters, this near-half of the volume bests many stand-alone commentaries on *Fear and Trembling* in its ability to make readable Kierkegaard's highly challenging and often misread masterpiece. Section two is devoted to the writings of Johannes Climacus (*Philosophical Fragments*



and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*), while section three takes up Anti-Climacus's books (*The Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*). The chapters that comprise each section take as their topic a particular thesis or conceptual remark about faith, giving us twelve in all. (There is a thirteenth chapter, an "interlude," which I will return to shortly.) These include the following: faith as the task of a lifetime, faith as the highest passion, faith as a leap and a striving, and faith as contemporaneity with Christ—without offense. A simple glance at the table of contents' list of these theses immediately conveys the complexity of faith in Kierkegaard's thought and, consequently, the very need for a work that attends to that complexity.

Those curious about Kierkegaard's view of faith or generally interested in developing in Christian faith themselves may find the issue of pseudonymity in Kierkegaard confusing, intimidating, or distracting. For these readers, Westphal helpfully explains this unusual authorial method. For the Kierkegaard scholar, Westphal goes a step further by justifying the title of his book—*Kierkegaard's* concept of faith—and succinctly defeating stalling worries that would keep analysis of faith from moving forward. In the course of this discussion in the book's introduction, he offers encouragement to the reader hoping to grow in faith, pointing out how for Kierkegaard, the very process of writing was itself a process of spiritual development and instruction. Kierkegaard believed that God reared him through his writings. Thus, to read with an eye toward appropriation is the right way to go, whereas those whose chief aim is some increase in knowledge, even theological knowledge, are not just reading Kierkegaard wrongly, but Westphal wrongly.

Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith is vintage Westphal in its emphasis on Kierkegaard's work as ideology critique. Echoing his 1987 *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Penn State), Westphal argues that Kierkegaard's harsh words about reason bear more resemblance to Jesus's harsh words to the Pharisees than they do the irrationalist caricatures still perpetuated about Kierkegaard. "Instead of assuming that Christianity must somehow show itself to be reasonable, it is the ideological concept of reason that needs to show us why we should adopt it. Does not every established order become evil just to the degree that it absolutizes itself, confuses itself with God or the kingdom of God?" (96). He helpfully expands and updates this insight by reminding us that the natural sciences (in our day) rather than speculative philosophy (in Kierkegaard's day) are more likely to fill the role of self-legitimizing arbiter of what counts as reason. Thus, to the metaphysical naturalism often assumed in scientific inquiry, "faith cannot submit without losing its own soul" (225).

Westphal weighs in on and presents refreshing perspectives on some old debates about Kierkegaard, such as the claim that he is a volitionalist (that beliefs are something that one can will) and that he is the father of existentialism. Concerning the latter, he argues that for Kierkegaard existence is "a technical term for the distinctive temporality of human life," and thus when we think of existence in light of the notion of "becoming a Christian,"

we can qualify the epithet's meaning (167). Westphal also engages some of the newer debates: that Kierkegaard is a proto-deconstructionist (see the introduction) and that he is some sort of divine command theorist.

The latter topic is addressed at length in the interlude, the chapter immediately following chapter 3: faith as obedience to divine commands. While I cannot go into the arguments in detail, let me offer a few observations that speak to the strategies and quality of the book as a whole. First, to the aid of non-philosophers, Westphal begins with a clear and accessible primer on epistemology and hermeneutics, thus introducing figures like Reid, Moore, Chisholm, Gadamer, and Derrida and sketching general positions within which he can situate the text's claims. The issue at stake is of course the Akedah, Abraham's binding of Isaac, and the many problems of knowledge, trust, and obedience that story raises. The dialogue Westphal stages between the text of *Fear and Trembling* and these other interlocutors is not merely an exercise in drawing interesting historical connections (though it does that) but also one that directly addresses the very crucial and common worries everyday people of faith ask themselves when they read Genesis 22: what exactly does God promise and command Abraham, and how am I to relate these promises and commands to my own situation? Ever mindful of these basic and essential concerns, Westphal enters the current debate himself, offering nothing short of a literature review of recent books that steer attention away from the importance of God's commands and Abraham's obedience to those commands. Those interested in where Westphal lands will have to read for themselves. Suffice it to say that the chapter perfectly exemplifies Westphal's remarkable ability to speak to novices and seasoned scholars almost at the same time, and to move scholarly conversations forward all the while making edifying remarks about faith with clear implications for those seeking spiritual direction. One of the most careful remarks of the book can be found in his discussion of the objection to divine commands as arbitrary, an objection to divine commands that many college sophomores can recite from memory. Contrary to the way the objection usually goes, arbitrariness does not necessarily connote "irrationalism, despotism, or blind fanaticism," and he illustrates this through the amount of allowance a child might earn upon performing certain chores. No general rational principle supports a precise dollar amount; thus in a sense that amount is arbitrary. Yet parents who arbitrarily assign \$5 for taking out the trash are not irrational, despotic, or fanatical. God's commands may follow no rational principle we know, yet that arbitrariness (perspectival arbitrariness, I would add) does not entail the commands are irrational (to God), despotic, or fanatical.

If Westphal's writing is instructive for newcomers to epistemology and hermeneutics, it is instructive also for newcomers to the history of philosophy, something true of every book of his I know. Consider the following gem: "Christianity is better off to have the Lessings of the world reject it outright than to have the Hegels of the world (and the Kants, for that matter) put it through the filter of (some version of) reason as

recollection and given back to us as the new, improved, reasonable version of Christianity” (199). The ease with which Westphal moves between conversations among philosophers ancient and postmodern, analytic and continental, highlights the extent to which many of these categories are mostly superficial distinctions we use to remain in our ideological bunkers. Westphal does not seem impressed by these categorizations, only by the ideas themselves, and readers will find his non-partisan presentation of them contagious.

In the end, one of the most winning features of Westphal’s book is its faithfulness to Kierkegaard’s faithfulness to a biblical picture of faith. A prime example comes when Westphal explores in chapter 8 faith as the happy passion that overcomes offense. Working through the concept of absolute paradox—a term that signifies the God-human Jesus Christ—Westphal concludes: “In other words, the absolute paradox is the doctrine of the incarnation combined with the doctrine of the atonement, which presupposes the doctrine of the fall and culminates in the doctrine of reconciliation” (151).

Westphal’s monograph goes a long way toward remedying the vacuum of work on Kierkegaardian faith, offering, among many other things, a welcome antidote to the common caricatures of Kierkegaardian faith as an irrational leap. It is only regrettable that the conversation is primarily confined to these five pseudonymous works, when in fact discussions of faith can be found behind every nook and cranny of Kierkegaard’s vast authorship—signed writings, journals, and so on. One can only hope for a sequel.

The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived, by Paul Moser. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 237 pages. \$29.99 (paperback).

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In his book *The Severity of God*, Paul Moser’s primary argument is that the academic discipline of philosophy must become Christ-centered in its pursuit of the love of wisdom. The way to achieve this is for the field of the philosophy of religion to develop the notion of “the severity of God”: “only a severe God would be worthy of worship, but such a God would be severely redemptive and thus vigorously transformative in a manner that overturns business as usual in religion, theology, philosophy, and related disciplines” (9). Moser contends that philosophers of religion ought to be more careful with its “object” of study—God—and the question becomes what kind of God is worthy of our philosophical investigations. The God who remains “worthy of worship” is the same God who philosophers of

