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Moser, THE SEVERITY OF GOD: RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY RECONCEIVED

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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



religion ought to pursue in their scholarly work. The God who is “worthy of worship” is “the God of severity,” and Moser provides intriguing insights on the character and nature of God.

For this review, I explain two aspects of Moser’s argument: (a) what focusing on the “severity” of God accomplishes, and (b) what Moser intends with the phrase “Christ-centered” in regards to the academic discipline of philosophy. In the middle of my explanation of (b), I raise critical questions concerning the pedagogical consequences of Moser’s account. Overall, I deeply appreciate Moser’s book and think that he pushes the fields of philosophy and theology in helpful and interesting directions.

Moser emphasizes the “severity” of God and seeks to balance out all of the talk of “divine love” within contemporary philosophy and theology—what he labels as forms of “cheap theism” (philosophy) and “cheap grace” (theology). By “severity,” Moser means how God brings “difficulty, discomfort, anxiety, stress, or insecurity for humans” (3). In order to be truthful about *who* God is and *how* God relates to humanity, philosophers and theologians need to consider the multiple ways in which God deals with humanity. Contemporary academics tend to focus exclusively on God’s love and mercy toward humanity, which are certainly important aspects of God’s relationship with the world (Moser never denies this!), but pay little or no attention to God’s condemnation and judgment on humanity.

An interesting feature of Moser’s argument is that it is reparative, not only for academic philosophers and theologians, but also for Priests and laypeople within the church. There certainly are Christians who think that God’s condemnation and judgment are the most important aspect of God’s relationship with the world in our contemporary culture. Sermons often reflect this, proclaiming God’s retribution and “severity” on American and European and Islamic cultures. However, on Moser’s terms, these proclamations of divine justice are neither clear nor complete. We must define God’s “severity” in relation to God’s love and mercy, and we ought to recognize how God’s “severity” is directed toward *all humanity*: those who worship God and those who do not. To claim divine retribution toward non-Christians is to neglect how God judges those who worship God as well. In this respect, I find that Moser’s argument has deep and timely implications for the life of the church.

Moser continually loops back to an account of divine love. For instance, the final steps that he takes in this book are: (a) the severity of God and the struggle of human existence lead to the redemptive process; (b) there is a “connection between severity and uplift” in the sense that, as the Apostle Paul says, we ought to “rejoice in our sufferings” (Rom. 5); (c) this suffering forms God’s people “in the inward character of Christ, with endurance, character, and hope” (Rom. 5); therefore, (d) God floods our “motivational centers with divine *agape*,” which gives us “life with God in Christ” (207). While the severity of God helps to balance out the over-confidence and over-emphasis on divine love within the modern academy, Moser concludes that a focus on the love of God remains inescapable.

The “fruit” or result of attending to the “severity” of God, which leads to new ways of thinking through divine love and mercy, is that it leads to a “Christ-shaped” philosophy. He believes that philosophy ought to be “Christ-shaped,” and he claims that philosophy should be an academic discipline centered on the prayer of Jesus at Gethsemane: “Not my will but your will be done.” What does he mean by “Christ-shaped” philosophy? Moser provides a comprehensive answer to this question, and there are seven steps required for understanding his argument. (1) For philosophy, as a discipline, to be “Christ-shaped” requires “Christ-shaped” *philosophers* (169–170). (2) The Apostle Paul, rather than Plato and Aristotle, serves as a primary source of reasoning for philosophers: “Paul’s Letter to the Colossians offers a striking portrait of Christ-shaped philosophy . . . : ‘See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy . . . and not according to Christ’ (Col. 2:8)” (170). Moser clarifies Paul’s warning: “If philosophy is the love and pursuit of wisdom, then *Christian* philosophy is the love and pursuit of wisdom under the authority of Christ, which calls for an ongoing union with Christ, including one’s cooperatively belonging to God in Christ” (170).

Before moving on to step #3, we need to raise a critical question: is the Apostle Paul a substitute for Plato and Aristotle as the primary source, within Ancient philosophy, for a “Christ-shaped” philosophy; or, should Christian philosophers simply add Paul as a primary source, within the Ancient philosophical canon? Moser remains unclear on whether he wants Paul *instead of* Plato and Aristotle or Paul *in addition to* Plato and Aristotle as the Ancient sources that form philosophical methodology and questioning. My only criticism of the book is the lack of clarity on the important questions concerning canon and pedagogy. Whom should the “Christ-shaped” philosopher teach? Which texts? How do we rank their importance in terms of authority? Do we submit Paul to Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophy, or do we make Plato and Aristotle answer to Paul’s (philosophical) theology? Does a “Christ-shaped” philosophy allow for dialogical and methodological reciprocity between Aristotle, Plato, and Paul?

Point #3: Before the verse from Colossians 2:8, in the first chapter of Colossians, Paul uses the phrase “spiritual wisdom” (*sophia pneumatike*) as a recommendation for what kind of wisdom we ought to pursue. This means that Paul is not *against* philosophy, and Paul makes this clear *before* making the claim about philosophy taking one “captive.” It also helps us answer the question of what a “Christ-shaped” philosophy looks like: it entails “spiritual” understanding and wisdom. Spiritual wisdom should not be understood in terms of individual spirituality but, rather, wisdom that is given through the divine person of the Holy Spirit: “Paul refers to *spiritual* wisdom, which amounts to *Spirit-empowered* and *Spirit-guided* wisdom” (170).

How does this wisdom, given by the Holy Spirit, relate to “Christ-shaped” philosophy? Moser answers this question in step #4: “Paul links spiritual wisdom to ‘the word of Christ’, to gratitude, and even to ‘spiritual

songs' . . . : 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, spiritual songs to God' (Col. 3:16)" (171). So far, Moser's steps offer a philosophical interpretation of Colossians; indeed, Moser's proposal for a "Christ-shaped" philosophy is a sophisticated commentary on Colossians. From these philosophical reflections on Colossians, Moser also offers this inference concerning today's practice of philosophy: "Paul would find secular philosophy [in today's academy] deficient owing to its neglect of the Word of Christ and spiritual songs to God" (171). What is the problem of contemporary academic philosophy? Philosophers do not attend to Scripture, *and* they do not display their gratitude through singing. We do not sing enough! Participating in and professing a "Christ-shaped" philosophy would lead us to "sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs of God." (It strikes me, at this point in Moser's argument, that Cornel West's hip-hop albums provide a sign of hope for "Christ-shaped" philosophy!)

While Moser's description of "Christ-shaped" *philosophy* is coming into focus, we still need to know more about what he means by "Christ-shaped" *philosophers* (picking up from #1). This leads us to step #5, where we learn what is required for being a *faithful* Christ-shaped philosopher:

Faith in God [for the Christ-shaped philosopher] is neither mere assent to a proposition . . . nor a leap in the dark. . . . Instead, it is the *responsive* cooperative commitment of oneself to the God who sends his Spirit with *agape* and forgiveness for the sake of Gethsemane union with Christ ["not my will but yours be done"]. Faith in God includes one's ongoing resolve to receive God's moral character in Christ inwardly and to belong to God, in the reverent attitude of Gethsemane. God calls us first by showing his *agape* for us, and human faith responds with receptive, cooperative self-commitment to this God who intervenes in our experience. (175)

A "Christ-shaped" philosopher has the following characteristics within her work: (a) "ongoing resolve" in terms of "putting on" God's character as we know it through Christ, (b) a "reverent attitude" allowing God's will to determine our own wills, and (c) a "receptive, cooperative self-commitment" to God's intervention and providential care.

Two steps remain for Moser's comprehensive answer to the question of what a "Christ-shaped" philosophy looks like. (6) "A philosophy can be more or less Christian, but if it omits the preeminence of Christ and the redemptive feature of Gethsemane union with Christ, it is Christian in name only" (185). "Christ-shaped" philosophy requires the content, dispositions, and substance of the claims of philosophy to be grounded in the confession "not my will but your will be done" —hence "Gethsemane union." And (7) "Christ-shaped" philosophy includes both action and talk, and Moser labels this as the "obedience mode" of philosophy: "How . . . is Jesus Christ relevant to philosophy as a discipline? . . . Philosophy in its normal mode, without being receptive to authoritative divine love-commands, leaves humans in a *discussion mode*, [which is] short of an *obedience mode* under divine authority" (188; emphasis added). As long

as this distinction does not become a forced binary, which Moser protects against, then its significance within contemporary philosophy cannot be understated.

Instead of dismissing Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatism wholesale, as several analytic and Christian philosophers do, Moser gives us a way to charitably engage with Rorty's proposal for philosophy to be reduced to "conversation." On Moser's terms, Rorty's pragmatism ironically does not put enough emphasis on the requirement for *action*. Rorty emphasizes only *talk*. Furthermore, although he is a self-described pluralist, he does not allow for a *mode of obedience* as a legitimate way to "talk" philosophy. Another point of healthy contention concerns Hilary Putnam's linguistic-centered, Wittgensteinian pragmatism that remains friendly toward both realism and theism. It focuses on *talk*, more than action, but does not police out a *mode of obedience* within philosophy—especially, his most recent publication, *Jewish Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Putnam's chapter on Martin Buber's "I-Thou" theology is all about how contemporary philosophy might work in a mode of obedience). Lastly, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action provides a way to understand the significance of Moser's proposal. We could defend Habermas's theory, on Moser's terms, in that it includes both *action* and *talk*. However, Habermas's philosophy certainly does not turn this *action* and *talk* into a *mode of obedience*. In summary: I find Moser's last two steps in his comprehensive development of what a "Christ-shaped" philosophy looks like quite helpful for navigating the work of some of the major philosophical thinkers in our time.

Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization, by Charles C. Camosy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. viii + 278 pages. \$30.99.

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Camosy argues that disagreement between Singer and Christians is narrow, and that both "can work together on many important issues of ethics and public policy" (7). Before discussing their respective ethical theories, and a possible "shift" in Singer's thought, Camosy compares how these seemingly contrasting "traditions" view four practical topics: abortion, euthanasia, non-human animals, and duties to the poor. As an attempt to place different approaches to practical moral issues "in contact" with each other, the book succeeds. However, the arguments of the book fall short of bringing Singer and Christians together in any more robust sense.

Camosy offers fine surveys of the relevant literatures on the aforementioned practical topics from both Singer's work and the work of Christian

