

12-1-1999

Process, Praxis and Transcendence, by James L. Marsh

Paul F. Lakeland

Fairfield University, pflakeland@fairfield.edu

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Lakeland, Paul F. "Process, Praxis and Transcendence, by James L. Marsh" (1999). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. 27. <http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs/27>

Published Citation

Lakeland, Paul F. "Process, Praxis and Transcendence, by James L. Marsh." *Theological Studies* 60.4 (1999): 762-764.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Religious Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

This account of the moral good creates two persistent problems in the interpretation of the text of Aquinas. First, it undercuts the teleological cast of Thomas's ethics. F. visibly struggles with Aquinas's eudaemonism, the thesis that happiness constitutes the ultimate goal of human moral endeavor. F. admits that Aquinas designates religious contemplation as the supreme good of the human person, next to which other goods are secondary. But F. argues implausibly that this thesis implies no subordination of other goods.

Second, the thesis that goods may not be directly harmed governs a strained interpretation of the use of lethal force in defense of the innocent. Although he admits that the text of Thomas often seems to justify the intention to kill an aggressor, F. struggles to prove that Aquinas actually sought only the incapacitation, not the death, of the aggressor. However, when F. tries to apply this theory to the case of Stauffenberg, the German officer who tried to assassinate Hitler (291), even he admits that this imputation of a nonlethal intention defies common sense.

F.'s reconstruction of Aquinas effectively presents a more modern Thomas than that of the standard version: more egalitarian, more constitutional, more pacifistic. In his brilliant retrieval of the four orders, F. has handed us a deeply libertarian Thomas. But the fidelity of this portrait to the text of Aquinas and the soft teleology of this portrait will provoke further debate.

Fordham University, New York

JOHN J. CONLEY, S.J.

PROCESS, PRAXIS AND TRANSCENDENCE. By James L. Marsh. SUNY Series in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences. Albany: State University of New York, 1999. Pp. xiii + 370.

This text is extremely hard to categorize. It is at one and the same time a philosophy of liberation, a metaphysics, a Christian apologetics, a socio-political ethic, and a prophetic vision. For Marsh, it is the culmination and completion of work done in two previous volumes, *Post-Cartesian Meditations* (1988) and *Critique, Action and Liberation* (1994). The ample referencing back to these earlier works, however, enables the reader to engage this text without benefit of acquaintance with the earlier two.

Part 1 in six chapters establishes M.'s philosophy of religion. He demolishes both modern and postmodern critiques of metaphysics, insisting upon a philosophical approach that owes much to Lonergan's investigations into the transcendental structure of the human subject and to the idea of God from process metaphysics. His radical metaphysics, championing differentiation and difference, leads to an anticapitalist moral-political option for the marginalized. A process, neoclassical idea of God allows for the incorporation of difference within the idea of God. A kind of process/neoclassical form of the ontological argument, moving from the intelligibility of being to the necessity of transcendent being, establishes that the God

whose “idea” is earlier outlined actually exists. God as the absolute “thou” grounds the true freedom of disposability. By combining Whiteheadian metaphysics and Marxian social theory, a bridge can be built between metaphysics and praxis.

Part 2 contains eight chapters, advancing the general thesis that the praxis that follows from the religious metaphysics outlined in Part 1 is one in which a Christian (actually primarily Catholic) religious vision coheres with and underpins a radical democratic socialist politics and ethics. M. first establishes the universality of Christ in what is a surprisingly traditional and even at times seemingly quite dyspeptic apologetic, and follows it with a chapter on Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche which, despite its clarity and common sense about the limitations and the value of these masters of suspicion, seems to advance the argument in no discernible way. M. makes connections between liberation theology and democratic socialism, and pays homage to Lonergan’s discussion of the forms of conversion. Several chapters utilize Kierkegaard very interestingly in a theological reading of Habermas’s critical theory. Finally M. make a good case for the need for the Christian churches to commit to a prophetic stand against the late capitalism of the “new world order.”

While the component parts of this argument are on the whole derivative, and M. makes no attempt to hide his debts, the real value of this work lies much more in the richness of the mix that M. has created. In the first place, he has put thinkers into creative relationship with one another in often quite a novel way—Whitehead and Marx, for example, or in particularly impressive fashion, Kierkegaard and Habermas. He draws the structure of his work from Hegel, the method largely from Lonergan, and the inspiration from process thought and critical theory, but the insights that emerge from the mix are very definitely his own. Second, his ability to connect closely metaphysics and praxis, and in a different way religious and political conversion, challenges both the common contemporary assumption that there is a disconnection between religion and political involvement, and the equally frequently voiced assumption that only a fuzzy liberalism can associate the two at all. At the same time, M. refreshingly represents a vision that is politically radical without needing to be theologically conservative.

The limitations of this work, vastly outweighed by its virtues, lie in a certain dogmatism, both philosophical and religious. The philosophical version I attribute to the intellectual boorishness of the Lonerganian system. Transcendental method is something of a juggernaut, and woe to those who get in its path. So, for example, the logic of the move from the intelligibility of being to belief in God is so self-evident to M. that other points of view are simply swept aside. Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Habermas, Kant, Derrida, Heidegger and many others are ultimately wrong, despite their real value, on precisely these grounds. But if you prove to them that their rejection of the ultimate intelligibility of being traps them in transcendental contradiction, why, they will shrug their philosophical shoulders and—like good postmoderns—live with the contradiction. Religiously, the dogmatism is most clear in Chapter 7’s Christian apologetic. If you are going to trace a

direct line from the neoclassical model of God to the claim that “the Christ event is universal,” then you have a problem with the integrity of non-Christian religions that is simply not satisfied by seeing them as auxiliary sources of wisdom, and you have an even bigger problem when, faced with the claims of other religions, you declare this very same Christianity to be only “relatively adequate” immediately after you have pronounced it “universally valid” (156).

In the end, if by their fruits you shall know them, M.’s theoretical underpinnings are retroactively validated by the orthopraxis to which they lead. But what are we to say of those who share the orthopraxis while they remain unpersuaded by the metaphysics, perhaps because of its very neatness?

Fairfield University, Connecticut

PAUL LAKELAND

WOMEN AND REDEMPTION: A THEOLOGICAL HISTORY. By Rosemary Radford Ruether. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998. Pp. xi + 366. \$45; \$19.

Through a study of Christian history, Ruether traces paradigms of gender in relation to the Christian claim of redemption in Christ. This book makes a valuable contribution to feminist theology because, as R. remarks, many Christian feminists have been locked in a paradigm “in which tradition is dismantled or bypassed.” They tend to return to the original Jesus, leaping from “an appropriation of this original ‘truth’ to a reconstruction of theology for one’s own time and context” (279). R. presents her project as a dialectical synthesis between Catholic theology’s notion of ongoing inspired development and Protestantism’s emphasis on the return to Christian origins. Her own Roman Catholic theological instincts emerge in the way she connects redemption so closely with theological anthropology and the doctrine of creation. Her commitments to global solidarity, ecological justice, and interreligious dialogue are evident in the multicultural scope of her study and in her stated conviction that feminist theology is not an exclusively Christian project.

R. begins with an examination of gender equality in the Jesus movement. She argues that women’s participation in that movement was aided by its dissolution of status hierarchies, lack of fixed leadership roles, and use of the home as worship space. Clearly alluding to the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, R. contends that this situation does not constitute “a discipleship of equals” understood as “a programmatic theory or a general practice of social equality between men and women,” but an “ad hoc situation” that allowed some gifted women to evangelize, teach, and lead prayer (23–24).

Throughout, R. stresses the diversity of Christianity. In the case of early Christianity, for instance, she argues that the Pauline churches were divided between those which moved toward greater patriarchalization and those that advocated spiritual equality for women. Such attention to mul-