

## Ethics as Theology: A Moral Meditation on Modernity

MARIA GWYN MCDOWELL\*

*Ethics as Theology*, volume 1, *Self, World, and Time*. By Oliver O'Donovan. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013. xiii + 138 pp. \$25.00 (paper).

*Ethics as Theology*, volume 2, *Finding and Seeking*. By Oliver O'Donovan. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2014. x + 249 pp. \$28.00 (paper).

*Ethics as Theology*, volume 3, *Entering into Rest*. By Oliver O'Donovan. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017. ix + 236 pp. \$32.00 (paper).

Oliver O'Donovan offers his *Ethics as Theology* in three volumes: *Self, World, and Time*; *Finding and Seeking*; and *Entering into Rest*. In these volumes, O'Donovan returns to questions regarding the foundations of Christian ethics, a topic he first (and last) broached in *Resurrection and the Moral Order* (1986). His interim focus has been on political theology, a topic for which he is widely respected. His few but substantive monographs have established O'Donovan as a central figure in evangelical ethics. His work is characterized by complex and nuanced thinking that requires careful and thoughtful engagement. More so than perhaps any of his previous work, these three volumes distill a tremendous breadth of knowledge and creative engagement with seminal figures in Christian ethics, patristic and medieval thinkers, and most substantively, scripture. *Ethics as Theology* is neither

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\* Maria Gwyn McDowell is the rector of St. Philip the Deacon Episcopal Church in Portland, Oregon. She received her PhD in theological ethics from Boston College and continues to explore, in both scholarly work and public theology, liberative theologies and practices in the areas of gender, sexuality, and race. She regularly blogs as a member of [womenintheology.org](http://womenintheology.org).

for the faint of heart, nor the beginning student of Christian ethics. The volumes are meditative reflections on a complex field requiring familiarity with the wide range of material covered, and multiple readings to digest.

Each volume builds on its predecessor: the first is “concerned with the study of Ethics itself as an ordered reflection on moral thinking and on its place within the life of faith” (*Entering into Rest* [ER], p. vii). The second shifts “from the study of moral thinking to moral thinking itself,” exploring “its progress from the original consciousness of agency, to the world as the structure of value, and to the time that determines the moment of decision” (ER, p. vii). The concluding volume “turns from the progress of moral thinking to its object, the forward horizon with which moral thinking engages” (ER, p. vii). Summarizing the volumes using the words of the author are, I think, essential, as the progress of O’Donovan’s argument comes across as an extended philosophical mediation on Enlightenment tropes of ethical discourse and themes in light of scriptural wisdom. This is, as I will discuss below, both a strength and a weakness.

### *Self, World, and Time*

O’Donovan’s fundamental claim that order and moral authority is mediated in and through creation but is understood only in light of the revelation of the gospel permeates the entirety of his work. Yet unlike *Resurrection and the Moral Order*, in which order often seemed to eclipse resurrection (as Stanley Hauerwas rightly quipped), O’Donovan shifts his tone at the outset of this revisitation: ethical reflection, in which we all participate, is an inductive awakening to the reality that we “swim in a sea of moral obligations” (*Self, World, and Time* [SWT], p. 1) to which we become aware as we obey the repeated biblical injunction to “Awake!” We awaken to the objective truth of the world, which is the “condition of all moral awareness,” the reality existing beyond ourselves (SWT, p. 10). However, we can only engage the objective reality of the world via ourselves, thus we must attend to the self, and in particular, to the self as an agent responsible not for everything, but “some things that happen in particular” (SWT, p. 13). Agency is exercised not in general, or in an ideal manner (foreshadowing O’Donovan’s criticism of ideology in *Finding and Seeking* [FS]), but in a particular time: “World and self are co-present only in the moment of time which is open to us for action” (SWT, 15). Time

opens us not to every possibility, but only to those possibilities immediately before us, freeing us to act *now*.

Neglecting the triad of self, world, and time leads to a series of ethical mishaps. Attending to programs or professional ethics may legitimate war or capital punishment, but fails to ask what it means for the self to be an executioner or warrior, reducing the self to a functionary, not a “human being with a conscience to guard and a life to live” (SWT, p. 18). Neglecting the world results in a “technological imperative” (a term O’Donovan borrows from Ellul) that may overcome obstacles, but never manages to pick up what has fallen. Failing to attend to time results in idealism that may never lead to action.

A proper awakening to the world, self, and time in such a way that it leads to “competent moral agents” who have been trained to “think truthfully about what may need to be done” (SWT, 63) is the central purpose of moral thinking and moral communication, which form the substance of *Self, World, and Time*’s discussion. O’Donovan is concerned to emphasize the reflective nature of practical reason. Ethics is that discipline that “reflects on the conditions of good moral *thinking*” (SWT, p. 77) and moral thinking is “about what is to be done next” (SWT, p. 79). Yet for Christians, and here O’Donovan’s evangelical commitments come to the fore, “ethics reflects on the conditions of obedience *to the realities which the Scriptures attest*—to those realities as a whole, that is, and not to selected parts” (SWT, p. 80). O’Donovan here wends his way between the Scylla and Charybdis of an ethics collapsed into doctrine, which O’Donovan argues is characteristic of Barth and Schleiermacher, and an ethics without any doctrine at all, which O’Donovan asserts characterizes pre-Vatican II casuistry.

O’Donovan offers a scriptural alternative, and here his creative associations bear thoughtful attention. Moral Theology “must speak of the world as we encounter it, for that is to that world that redemption as drawn near” (SWT, p. 91). Citing Barth, O’Donovan claims the center of the Christian message is “God with us,” and so awakening to the world, self, and time is simultaneously awaking to a world, self, and time already given by God, and to which we are obligated to respond by exercising our free agency. The form of theological ethics then, is faith, love, and hope. This default sequence of the triad more familiar to us in the shifted order of 1 Corinthians 13, “faith, hope, and love,” is chronological. The Christian life begins in faith at baptism, continues in love by participation in community, and is hopeful

as it considers the future. O'Donovan maps the triad of self, world, and time with this foundational triad of theological virtues.

Faith is the “prior giftedness of the active self” (SWT, p. 105), granted priority as the “awareness of the self-made competent by an act of God to overcome the incompetence of guilt and self-doubt” (SWT, p. 109). Here O'Donovan bridges classical Reformation divides by emphasizing the givenness of the self by God to be an active agent. Theology, for O'Donovan, renews human agency as itself a gift of God to be exercised as an essential response of faith. Agency is “receiving God's address to us” (SWT, p. 112). The story of Scripture and the faith we receive from it is “the consciousness of being called to life by God, who tells us of our agency by telling us of his” (SWT, p. 112). This call to live happens in the world, and it is “within the created world that the goods we love, the ends for which we act, the reasons we discover for each purpose we form, arise” (SWT, p. 113). Keeping the order of the triad, love is not yearning (a brief critique of the priority given to desire in contemporary theology, perhaps directed at fellow Anglican Sarah Coakley), but rooted in faith, that is, the world as it is given, “the beauty of the finite” (SWT, p. 114—a critique perhaps directed at the theological aesthetics of the Orthodox David Bentley Hart). O'Donovan elevates Augustine on love, reminding us of his greatest contribution to the Western understanding of love: “it was not a power within us, an impulse driving us out into the world or up towards our supernatural destiny, but a purchase that objective reality had upon us” (SWT, p. 115). It is in and through the objective reality of the world that we enter into the theological reality of love. Finally, then, time and hope correspond, as it is in a time shaped by the promise of God, the hoped for future, that we act. “God's Kingdom,” says O'Donovan, “is the condition for our acting” (SWT, p. 124).

### *Seeking and Finding*

O'Donovan's second volume shifts from describing Christian ethics as an intellectual discipline to explicating the virtues of faith, love, and hope. O'Donovan develops a Spirit-filled reflection where our “futile passive-reactive immanence” is rescued and turned, by the Spirit, to a reflection on “the moral instruction of Jesus, illuminating it for each successive attempt to understand, obey, and communicate” (FS, p. 2). Here O'Donovan turns more explicitly away from his focus on resurrection in his earlier work to the active, accompanied by the

Spirit in a deliberative reflection on scripture as a witness to God's action (*FS*, p. 4), which serves in turn as a source for our moral action. The call of the Spirit is how we know what it is to which we must respond, and as Christians, we grant privilege to the Spirit as an authority that informs us, through scripture, about how we are to exercise our responsibility.

Important for O'Donovan is that Paul "does not oppose divine spirit to human or demonic, or good spirit to evil spirit, but persistently opposes life in the Spirit to 'life by the flesh'" (*FS*, p. 14). Humanity may "remain self-enclosed within its own immanence, or lifted up to share the life of God" (*FS*, p. 14). To remain self-enclosed is to focus on the self without understanding the world as the reality outside of our selves in which we are called to act. This first understanding of the flesh as "self-enclosed" fails to attend to the givenness of the world as God's. Here, sin is an offense against God. However, living according to the flesh can also be directed against the self. Here, the failure is to "doubt the selves that God holds out to us and the God who offers us ourselves" (*FS*, p. 21). Doubt then, is "the sin that undermines agency at its root" (*FS*, p. 21). Agency is, however, O'Donovan's primary concern: the "condition that God has set upon the agency he gives us is that it should be exercised" (*FS*, p. 21). The self is an already gifted life responsible to act according to reality of the world in time shaped by the hope of God's promise. The overriding concern for O'Donovan, and focus of his ethical reflection and moral deliberation, is "the fulfillment of the self in agency" (*FS*, p. 118). This volume then, explicates faith, love, and hope in light of the sins that correspond to these three theological virtues: doubt, folly, and anxiety.

Rather than summarize the connections between virtues and vices, a task made complicated by O'Donovan's rather meandering but creative path, it is worth highlighting how he reads scripture in light of his paired triads. In a fascinating discussion of the Lord's Prayer, O'Donovan asserts that a "new and unique" action "lies at the unspoken center" of the three petitions governed by "this day" (*FS*, p. 147). In the prayer, O'Donovan sees his foundational triad: asking for bread in faith that God will deliver is to ask that "the worldly conditions of action" are granted for the present time, "this day." The self as the loved free agent is the topic of the fourth petition, "we who grasp at the opportunity of today must be set free from yesterday" (*FS*, p. 148). The granting of freedom is itself an act of love by God, and

frees us to love our neighbor. The fifth petition asks that our actions have a future, that they are delivered from the evil that is “the final frustration of my agency” (*FS*, p. 149). To ask in faith for the possibility of future agency is to rely on the hope of promises fulfilled. Here is the perfect example of the priority pervading O’Donovan’s work: scripture is presented in light of the framework of self/faith, world/love, time/hope. O’Donovan consistently utilizes the technical terminology of ethical discourse, itself derived from a lifetime of scholarship, but melds it with a lifetime of meditation on God’s word.

If one is expecting an evangelical ethic that starts explicitly with scripture, or a systematic explanation of scriptural principals or rules that might govern ethical reflection, moral deliberation, or the actions of a free agent, one will be disappointed. It is not that O’Donovan rejects scripture as a norm. He is clear that “the extended adventures which constitute our service of love are measured by that norm, the works and words of Jesus, the perfected law which lies at the heart of Scripture” (*FS*, 139). Yet O’Donovan offers no explanation for what scriptures ought to be emphasized, or how to understand their multiple interpretations. The works and words of Jesus upon which O’Donovan focuses are atypical for an ethicist: for instance, there is no explication of the Sermon on the Mount, a passage considered paradigmatic by many Christian ethicists. Whether this is a weakness or a sign of insightful creativity is up to individual readers to decide.

### *Entering into Rest*

The final volume makes explicit a conversation that haunted the previous two: O’Donovan has a clear bent toward deontological ethics but considers it alone an insufficient framework. His affinity for duty is evident from the beginning of *Self, World, and Time*, where the agent awakens to herself as a responsible agent, one with an obligation to act in response to a gift given. Here, O’Donovan clearly stands in the stream of the thinkers he references most frequently: Augustine, the Reformers (frequently Luther and Hooker), Barth, Kant, and Kierkegaard. What is striking is that *Finding and Seeking* gives the impression that in the midst of a distinctly deontological bent, his emphasis on hope, the last of the theological triad, might lend itself toward a more teleological interpretation of ethics: hope is in the promises of God that *will* (indicating both certainty and futurity) be fulfilled. In *Entering into Rest*, O’Donovan makes clear that

ethical reflection has both deontology and teleology as its tasks, and he blends them by a fascinating reflection on 1 Corinthians 13, one of the two places where Paul inverts the default order to be “faith, hope, and love.”

O’Donovan argues that Paul’s shifting of the default order is not accidental. By prioritizing love, which, remember, O’Donovan sees as action in a world rightly understood, Paul brings together two lines of thought: “the self-restraining, deferential character of life in community,” and “the limited historical usefulness of particular vocations with the eschatological finality of moral perfection” (*ER*, p. 2). O’Donovan asserts that an “ethics that concluded in hope would be apophatic, gesturing towards a goal of which it could not speak” (*ER*, p. 3). Rather, prioritizing love is both “a statement about the finality of community” and “the virtue that ‘anchors’ the endurance of time in a future of promise” (*ER*, p. 3). We can, and should, speak of love that occurs in a world we are always continually understanding (as our knowledge is always finite), at a time that frees us to act in the present by limiting our options to what is possible now. Love is inherently bidirectional. It looks forward to the eschaton in which we will rest in God’s kingdom, while always looking back to our responsibility to freely act as we are able, now. In Romans, where love also concludes the triad, love is introduced “not as a demand, but as a present reality, a sure sign of the presence of the divine, reflectively completing and evoking hope, an eschatological anticipation made real by the presence of the Holy Spirit” (*ER*, p. 7). The Spirit makes present in history the promised end. Love is “devotion,” that which “rests finally in its object and is wholly fulfilled in it” (*ER*, p. 14). It is beyond the scope of this essay to summarize the interaction between the future and the past in the present through community—how communication sanctifies work, friendship, and meaning, and the endurance of love, which must die to live. We reflect in love on the world and its meanings as displayed to us, and its locus as the theater in which God is working God’s purposes. Our devotion, our love, is finally accepted “within ourselves as the form of obedient action” (*ER*, p. 229).

### *Conclusion*

This three-volume set is an impressive engagement with a wide range of themes, thinkers, and the breadth and depth of scripture. O’Donovan is a master of his material. It comes across as a superbly

informed meditation on human agency, ethical reflection, and scripture. Yet it is not necessarily clear which comes first, scripture or that ethical language of modernity: agency and self. In O'Donovan, they are seamlessly woven together. The impression is of a profoundly philosophical ethic, one that rings in the tone of the modern ethicists and philosophers with whom O'Donovan primarily engages. Further, these volumes do not explore contemporary ethical issues. This makes his few references to contemporary issues sometimes strange: autism and gender dysphoria appear as rather paradigmatic "pathologies" more than once (for instance, see *SWT*, p. 13). The distance O'Donovan maintains from hot-button topics allows a reader who has strongly disagreed with his positions in the past (such as myself) to be deeply moved by his profound meditations on the vulnerability of relationships in community, or the provisional nature of present judgments in light of a humble acknowledgment that we do not yet know what we do not yet know. At the same time, focusing on the framework of reflection and deliberation gives these works a sense of distance from the very reality so central to right ethical and moral thinking. Further, frequent use of noninclusive gender language for humanity and the rather stunning lack of reference to female or non-Western European (except for the obvious dependence on the North African Augustine) thinkers gives the impression that only the (mostly) white male European canonists have anything of significance to say on what it is to be a human agent. Lurking in the background here is the suspicion that should O'Donovan define more precisely the content of the real world in which we live, its limitations and obligations, we might profoundly disagree.

That said, I am grateful for the meditations offered by O'Donovan, the surprising and profound connections he offers, and can only echo what every other reviewer has said: these complex and wise volumes bear reading more than once.