



Book Review of: *A Philosophical Anthropology of the Cross: The Cruciform Self*, Brian Gregor, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013, 261 pp.

What caught my eye in deciding to ask the publisher for a review copy was the subtitle. I received more than I had bargained for! At least I confess at the outset: I am not by any means a sophisticated reader in philosophy. Brian Gregor is. Another work that establishes that self-realization firmly is by the brilliant theologian David Bentley Hart, entitled *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (2003).

Enough said. With that disclaimer, I shall proceed with the review.

Chapter 1 begins with the very question of justifying religious faith through philosophy. The question posed is:

How should philosophy approach a reality that claims to be irresolvable scandal for philosophical thinking (p. 1)?

The book explores that question with a specific problematic, “whether philosophy can think the cross of Jesus Christ... (p. 1) For the cross of Christ is “central to Christian faith as both a historical event and a fundamental figure of Christian discourse (p. 1).” The author writes that

Our task will be to consider how philosophical thinking can face the cross honestly, so that it is transformed by the cross rather than transforming the cross in order to fit its philosophical agenda. We are investigating, in other words, the possibility of an authentically cruciform philosophy... What does the cross of Christ – as both a historical event and a figure of Christian discourse – mean for thinking about the human being and what it means to become a self (pp. 1 & 2)?

Several further related questions are posed “that will occupy us in these pages (p. 2)” the author avers.

Throughout the book, “two competing accounts of human being, identity, and selfhood. (pp. 2 & 3)” will be held in tension. The sheer particularity of the cross that “claims to be the locus of true self-understanding for the human being (p. 3).” is a scandal par excellence for Jew and Greek. So Gregor asks:

Is the cross a reality that philosophical thought cannot adequately think? If so, what can the philosopher do with the scandalous, unsurpassable, irresolvable reality of the cross (p. 5)?

Gregor asks further

What does the cross of Christ mean for our understanding of what it is to be human, and to be oneself (p. 8)?

Gregor’s main interlocutors will be philosopher Paul Ricoeur, but with discussions too of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Charles Taylor. From the theological side, Dietrich Bonhoeffer will be mainly discussed. Bonhoeffer and Ricoeur make excellent dialogue partners for several reason, claims the author, adduced on page 8. Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Luther are also dialogue partners, along with other Lutheran thinkers.

The author continues in various ways to look at the philosopher thinking thoughts after the cross. He is certain that

Insofar as the philosopher thinks with honesty and integrity, revelation is not a *deus ex machina*<sup>1</sup> that stops the conversation. It introduces new questions and deepens the philosophical sense of wonder and mystery (p. 13).

As to the book at hand, such philosophical thinking “is a matter of articulating a cruciform philosophy of the faithful self (p. 14).” Gregor, at the end of Chapter 1, writes that he will argue that philosophical anthropology is incomplete in itself, not simply for want of a new ontology (contra Heidegger), but because it needs Christology. For it is not ontology that is fundamental, but the word of the crucified Christ (p. 17).

Part One, Chapter 2 considers “The Hermeneutics of the Self”. He follows Emmanuel Levinas in arguing that

My first priority is to care for this other person. The face of the other breaks through the closed circle of my being, revealing that ethics, not ontology, is most fundamental (p. 35).

Again, following Levinas, he argues that

The word of God calls the self to responsibility, and thus into its true humanity. This excludes any religious piety that would seek God for one’s own sake – for the sake of securing a meaningful life here and now, or for the hope and assurance of an afterlife. True humanity and true religiosity alike consist in the destruction of this egoistic concern for one’s own being (p. 37).

The cross, argues Gregor, is the only proper orientation for humanity, and

I therefore argue for a cruciform interpretation of identity, recognition, and justification by faith, in which faith does not resolve itself into a self-contained or self-mediating identity (p. 38).

He pursues this in the next chapter.

In Chapter Three, “Faith, Substance, and the Cross”, we read:

And for much of this book, our concern will be the category of existence before God (*coram Deo*). To begin, then, I offer a few remarks on why this category is the ultimate horizon of strong evaluation, and thus for becoming a self (p. 39).

Gregor sees this existence before God over against any other “existence before” – be it another self, a community, an institution, a code, a principle, etc. – as qualitatively paramount:

With God as the criterion, “an infinite accent falls on the self,” such that the self becomes aware of itself in a different way. With God as its criterion, self-consciousness is intensified not merely finitely but infinitely (p. 39).

The author is following Kierkegaard here. This is offensive to human reason because counterintuitive. It only deepens when it becomes Christological.

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1. <sup>1</sup> “God from the machine”: an unexpected power or event saving a seemingly hopeless situation, especially as a contrived plot device in a play or novel – or religion!

There is therefore a phenomenological difference between the self before a human criterion, the self before the God of a general theism, and the self before the crucified Christ (p. 40).

Gregor asks: “What sort of selfhood is constituted before the criterion of the God on the cross (p. 40)?” To gain recognition/justification before God, two competing ontologies kick in: one of self-justification or one of justification by faith. Gaining such is legitimate provided done in a cruciform way. But

The self has this identity in faith and hope, based on a promise for the future rather than an intuited presence. This is a central insight for our *anthropologia crucis* [anthropology of the cross] (pp. 40 & 41).

But the relational is supreme in personhood, not the substantial. It is the first principle of ontology. The Trinity is therefore a philosophical scandal because of the priority of the relational.

The person does not first exist and then subsequently enter into relations with others. Instead, relations constitute persons in their very being (p. 49)., claims Gregor. Further, the substance of the human is the qualitative how a person exists and acts.

Chapter Four treats of “The Incurved Self”. The term means a wilful turn away from God, “a sort of perverse conversion (*conversio*) to oneself, which in turn distorts one’s relations with others (p. 61).” Gregor points out in this regard that

Religious piety is all too often a manifestation of incurvature. [Martin] Luther reminds us that the *homo religious* [religious person] can also be the *homo incurvatus in se* [person incurved in one’s self] (p. 64).

Gregor follows Bonhoeffer to discuss at further length incurvature. Bonhoeffer understands freedom over against the incurved self not as “being free *from* others, but being free *for* them (p. 69).” Such an understanding is not only counterintuitive, it also puts the accent at an entirely different point. (One need think only of what freedom means for the woman aborting a fetus, versus a woman keeping the baby out of freedom *for* the child not yet born.)

Chapter 5, “The Anthropological Question”, the question of address is discussed. Gregor draws on Bonhoeffer in asserting,

The self can only understand itself through revelation. The Word is the true address in which the self is placed into true self-understanding (p. 91).

Self-understanding is only through God, and consequently God is one’s only foundation. Consequently too,

The anthropological question – *Who am I?* – is dislocated and reoriented by the Christological question: *Who do you say that I am?* Now the primary question is not my own, but the question that Christ poses to me. This is a question the self is unprepared to answer. Instead, the self responds with crucifixion (p. 92).”

Philosophical ontology is confronted by Christology, since the most fundamental *logos* is none other than Christ. This is where Kierkegaard asserts that, as Gregor explains,

The self cannot avoid the Christological question. It is impossible to remain neutral about this question, since even neutrality involves a decision. One

must have an opinion. God entered into history, and he did so *for me*. But this incarnation is an irresolvable paradox for thought. The paradox of the God-man is Christianity's weapon against speculation, against the thinking ego and its drive for closure. Here is a phenomenon that permits no system of thought, because there is not a general or universal insight to be appropriated reflectively or speculatively. When confronted with this claim, the self is brought to the apex of its responsibility for itself. Thus the incarnation makes a phenomenological difference: the self is intensified immensely by the recognition that one exists as an individual before God, but this intensity increases even more when the self hears that it exists before Christ – that is, that God was born, suffered, and died *for this particular self*. About this, [Kierkegaard] insists, one must have an opinion (pp. 93 & 94).

Bonhoeffer holds that

Personhood is ontologically primary, and the fundamental ontological question is the Christological question: *Who do you say that I am* (p. 94)?

In relation to that, the human *logos* must die. For Christ offends:

Hence W.H. Auden's famous remark that none but Christ "arouse *all* sides of my being to cry 'Crucify Him.'" (p. 95)"

Gregor near the chapter's end writes:

The being of the cruciform, Christomorphic self therefore consists in being there for others. Likewise the church is only the church in being for others; it does not exist for itself, and it does not exist to implement theocratic rule of the world (p. 99).

Finally, Gregor explains, that if the Christ story is true, then there is found a point of unity for the human being, and there is also found the answer to the anthropological question. "But this answer opens up a whole new set of questions (p. 100)." This takes us to Part Two.

Part Two, Chapter 6 discusses "The Concreteness and Continuity of Faith". The concreteness is in the penultimate historical existence of the Christian, the "horizon within which the ultimate shows itself (p. 114)." The continuity of faith is located in the church community, where the word is proclaimed. "The word addresses the world and destroys its false self-understanding – its incurvature, despair, and sense of God-forsakenness – in order to call the world to a *genuine* worldliness (p. 114)."

Chapter 7, "The Capable Human Being as a Penultimate Good", calls for subtlety of interpretation lest the cross be seen as Nietzschean negation that would valorize passivity, submission, suffering, and even victimhood. This rhetoric is a luxury that certain privileged people can afford, but it is not good news for those who are oppressed, powerless, disabled, or living in abusive relationships and other situations in which they need to be strengthened (p. 123).

The author looks to Bonhoeffer to discern proper human agency and capability. Works of love, discernment of God's will in concrete ethical situations, and the use of reason appropriately are

all discussed. He then discusses Matthew Henry's book, *I Am the Truth*, critiquing it in favour of the *skandalon* [scandal] of the cross.

Gregor also discusses Christ's classic call, *take up your cross and follow after me* (p. 135).

Chapter 8, "The Call to Responsibility", looks at conscience through the writing of Paul Ricoeur. Gregor writes,

If conscience is an organ of receptivity, it is also an organ of self-mediation, self-justification, and self-deception (p. 151).

The self needs to let go the autonomy of conscience that aspires to know good from evil by itself. Christ in other words must become my conscience. The chapter is summed up thus:

We need to be accused by the law, to recognize our guilt and responsibility as infinite and unbearable, in order that we can recognize the costliness (and liberating power) of grace... Only then can we suggest that the ontology of justification by faith is not a shirking of responsibility and that justifying faith really does set us free *for* (rather than *from*) responsibility (p. 155).

In Chapter 9, "Reflexivity, Intentionality, and Self Understanding", Gregor states:

The cruciform self does not understand itself as a closed circle or totality, but as a genuinely ek-static identity in another, always outside of itself in faith and hope, in perpetual departure toward Christ and the neighbor (p. 159).

And so

the ultimate word is a counter-*Logos*, exerting a counter-intentionality that puts the human *logos* in question: Who are *you*, that you presume to question me? The intending *logos* must be destroyed, crucified by the word of the cross, inverted by the counter-*Logos* (p. 161).

And again:

The ego must surrender itself as the master of meaning in order to become the disciple of the counter-*Logos*, who calls the self: *Take up your cross and follow after me* (p. 163).

But there is

The problem, then, [of] how faith can seek philosophical and theological self-understanding without falling back into the incurvature of systematic, totalizing thinking (p. 163).

The author writes:

Rather, thinking consciousness is dethroned in the living, personal encounter with the crucified One, who calls me to take up the cross and follow after him in faith (p. 164).

Further, "The ultimate word relativizes the ethical-religious formation of the self (p. 168 & 169)." "Spirituality" runs that self-centred risk, since it too readily "is a consumer approach to transcendence (p. 169)." Gregor writes:

At every step along its spiritual journey the self retains its sovereignty of choice (*hairesis*), heretically selecting the beliefs and practices that "work" for itself (p. 169).

However, in spiritual development, "The call of Christ does not constitute us as religious selves, but as fully human beings (p. 169)."

Gregor observes further:

The self is confronted with a choice, and in choosing, the self is disclosed. Who do you say that I am? This question discloses the truth about the self. But this question does not ask for an utterance of fact, a static *said*; it calls for a *saying* that is always renewed in following after. Thus true self-understanding (the true *know thyself*) is not the reflective, meditative thinking (*Nachdenken*) of idealism, but the self-understanding of the disciple in the way of *Nachfolge* [discipleship].

This cruciform self-understanding therefore entails a move, in Rocoour's terms, *from text to action*. Self-understanding is manifest in the moment of appropriation, application, and obedience... True self-understanding, by contrast, consists in the transition from text to action (pp. 173 & 174).

In the final chapter (10), "Religion within the Limits of the Penultimate", "we will see whether we should think of the cruciform self as a *homo religious*. Religion negates. "It tears down the human being in order to create the sense that we need God (p. 180)." Nonreligious interpretation of Christianity thrives by contrast on affirmation. It is a Yes to the capable human being, and a Yes to the polyphony of life in this world, with all its joys, sorrows, and responsibilities. It recognizes that God is not threatened by our existence in this world.

Moreover, authentic faith does not seek a *deus ex machina*<sup>2</sup> to dissolve all of its problems. Rather than pointing to a God of power, scripture overturns our expectations by pointing us to God's powerlessness and suffering in the world. As Bonhoeffer famously writes, "only the suffering God can help." "The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us," as he forsook Christ on the cross. The *theologia crucis* [theology of the cross] entails an *anthropologia crucis* [anthropology of the cross]. God lets us live in the world *etsi deus non daretur* [as if God is not a given/does not exist]. The self-understanding of faith involves this recognition that we live as human beings without God as a working hypothesis. But this is not secular humanism *tout court* [in brief]; it is a Christological, cruciform humanism. We recognize ourselves as God-forsaken, yet this recognition occurs *before God*. This gives a striking dialectical turn to the category of *coram Deo* [existence before God]: faith means living without God, yet *before God* and *with God*. We encounter God in the cross, and that is how God is with us and helps us – not as a *deus ex machina* or as the omnipotent deity of metaphysics, but in his weakness and suffering in the world... God discloses his power and wisdom in the weakness and folly of the cross; that is how God is present in the world, and that is how he helps us. God calls us to participate in his suffering by living a cruciform existence, which means living a "secular" life in the world, without appealing to the consolation of "religion". This kenotic [self-emptying] being-in-the-world is how one becomes genuinely Christian, and thus human (p. 180).

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<sup>2</sup>See definition on page 2.

This quote is worth pondering slowly and repeatedly. In this reviewer's experience, if he never sits through another worship song appealing to God's omnipotent power to rescue us from just about everything, he has sung far too many such songs! They turn precisely on that "ego" so antithetical to the cruciform self...

The author writes of the bodily resurrection of Christ:

As with the word of the cross, the risen body of Christ presents philosophy with a *skandalon* it cannot resolve. Philosophy and kerygma [preaching of the resurrection] stand in confrontation (p. 188).

Gregor argues that a cruciform philosophy "will let the scandal of Christ's bodily resurrection remain (p. 188)."

As to philosophy, Christ already occupies the place philosophy wishes to usurp. "In order to proceed according to genuine limits, then, philosophy must begin with the actuality of revelation (p. 190).", Gregor writes again:

The word of the cross addresses and transforms me, not only because it is meaningful *for me*, but because of the actuality of the risen Christ there *for me* (p. 191).

As to faithful living in the world, the author opines:

Christ stands in the center of human existence, but also in the center of history, nature, and all reality. Thus when God recognizes us in Christ and claims us as his own, we are taken out of ourselves and our sense of what is meaningful, since we inhabit a reality that is larger than our own egocentric or anthropocentric cares (p. 192).

As to resurrection of the self,

The promise of resurrection is a scandal; it is offensive to our self-understanding. It does not fit with the culturally available schema of belief of our scientifically disenchanted world. It also conflicts with the dualism of so much popular spirituality and religiosity, which anticipates an afterworld populated by disembodied souls. But the promise of resurrection is also offensive to a significant trend in Continental philosophy, which assumes that religion and ethics must be detached and disinterested (p. 194).

Further, the author affirms that

Faith is not about making the self into a *homo religiosus*, but into a human being in the fullest sense. Faith is not about interiority, but about the whole human being – the *anthropos teleios* – in relation to God (p. 196).

As to the Nietzschean worldview, Gregor objects that the world is not free to be the world. He writes:

Likewise, if the world and the human being are justified by an ultimate word (an affirming *Yes*), how [as Nietzsche thinks] could I bear not to be the one who speaks this word of affirmation? How could I stand to be dependent on a word from outside of myself? Thus, there is no external, justifying Word. [This conclusion betrays] the condition of a self and a world curved in on themselves, locked into the burden of self-justification.

By contrast, the promise of resurrection follows the logic of the gift: it is unconditional, and it opens a genuine futurity and new creativity in a way that Nietzsche's tragic *amor fati* [love of fate] simply cannot (p. 198).

Gregor concludes his study with these words:

In Christ the world finds its true identity. Consequently, the eschatological word of justification does not devalue the world; it pronounces a polemical No against the world's false self-understanding, but only for the sake of a *better* worldliness. By recognizing itself as penultimate, the world is free to flourish as the world, and the cruciform self is free to flourish as a human being (p. 198).

My opening remarks notwithstanding, this is a profoundly good read!