

BOOK REVIEW

Ephraim Radner, *Mortal Goods: Reimagining Christian Political Duty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024)

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Born out of a letter he wrote to his adult children in 2022, Ephraim Radner's *Mortal Goods* is a work of both sophisticated theology and a deeply personal autobiographical reflection. Radner, the Professor Emeritus of Historical Theology at Wycliffe College, Toronto, steps into the long tradition of writing such letters dating back to ancient Greece and Rome (p. 6), and a revised version of the letter forms the conclusion of the book. In his exploration of what makes life valuable and the 'good life' he longs for his children, the letter encapsulates the essence of the book upon which he subsequently embarked to provide the wider political and cultural context for the letter.

Against the backdrop of the culturally dominant drives towards achievement, production, and 'leaving the world a better place', Radner instead locates the 'Good Life' in a renewed appreciation of the 'ordinary' as embodied by billions of people throughout time (p. 203), and the 'mortal goods' given by God in His creation: 'birth, growth, nurture, generation, weakening, caring, and dying' (p. xxi). His argument throughout the book is that the vocation of Christian politics is limited to tending these mortal goods, in order to secure the Good Life. Thus, he situates himself, along with Jacques Ellul and others, within the field of 'political indifferentism', suggesting that it is only when the mortal goods are threatened that Christian political engagement needs to go beyond what he describes as 'normal' politics into the realm of the 'abnormal'.

In part one of the book, Radner explores the character of this life in terms of our service of God 'offered' through the mortal goods. He analyses our temptation to respond to the 'evil days' in which we live by attempting to improve the world ('betterment'), escaping it morally ('beatitude'), or by ignoring it ('distraction'), suggesting that 'sojourning' is instead the appropriate posture for mortal human beings. As sojourners, our purpose is the service of God, *avodat Hashem*, which, as Radner puts it in his letter, is the framework for a life in which everything is received as a gift from God, and everything is offered back to God in thanks (pp. 204–5). In this context, the vocation of Christian politics is to order the offering of the mortal

goods, as that which is given to our lives rather than that which is manufactured. Hence, he draws upon the work of social historians, such as E. P. Thompson, to coin the phrase ‘sanctified peasantry’ to describe the aim of our politics as an offering of ‘life’s matter to its Maker’ (p. 61) and to argue that the ‘moral economy of the peasantry’, is in fact the best possible foundation for Christian politics (p. 45).

Indeed, after a dense second half of the book which explores the scope of Christian politics and the possibility of the ‘Good Life’ lived against the backdrop of his understanding of ‘catastrophe’ as the foundation rather than an interruption to normal political life, Radner returns in his final chapter to the ‘peasant moral economy’ which was the context of Nazareth and the political form of Jesus’ own life. Thus, the ‘mortal goods of our offering are contained within the history of Jesus’ life’ (p. 185) and in Nazareth the measure of our own political duty is given in the human experience of the Son of God as ‘one of local, familial labor, and relations, carried out in the compass of a small town or village’ (p. 184). For all its deep theological and philosophical engagement with intellectual heavyweights such as Aristotle, Augustine, Luther and Hobbes, it is Radner’s profound Biblical insight and spiritual wisdom which is perhaps most captivating in this work. Found especially in the middle chapters 6 and 7 on ‘The Beauty of Limits’ and ‘An Incomplete Life’, even readers who might disagree with some of his more traditional conclusions would struggle not to be inspired by the beauty of his vision of life offered up amidst its limitedness and incompleteness.

The authority of Radner’s own personal experience described in chapter 7, his battle with the temptation to ‘betterment’, his deep suffering and struggle to offer all of it in thanks as ‘something beautiful for God’, leads him to a vision which is at once immensely challenging in its ‘anti-utilitarian tenor’ (p. 72) and deeply liberating as we accept that life is limited, and there is so much which is ‘undoable’ (p. 95).

For Radner, ‘Reimagining Christian political duty’ therefore, doesn’t look like ‘a guide to politics or a systematic treatment of the logic and ethics that ground our politics’ (p. 202), and some readers might be disappointed that there isn’t a more detailed description of what political duty does look like. But Radner is clear that this will be worked out chiefly in the local, and the ‘small spaces’ of our own Nazareths of ‘generation, meals together, sleeping, toiling, encouraging and suffering, praying and teaching’ (p. 181). Even if I never get to write such a letter to my own children, this book has left me inspired to work out how to offer up my own Nazareth as a ‘beautiful thing’ to God.

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