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## Review of Piety and Responsibility: Patterns of Unity in Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and Vedanta Decika

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John N Sheveland, *Piety and Responsibility: Patterns of Unity in Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and Vedanta Desika*

Piety and Responsibility: Patterns of Unity in Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and Vedanta Desika  
by Sheveland, John N

Review by: Hugh Nicholson

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## The Journal of Religion

concepts in the work of both thinkers, although with different emphases and nuances; Kierkegaard's concern with subjectivity and "the individual" needs to be exposed to Whitehead's cosmological concern, and vice versa. "They wrote, respectively, of self and world in relation to God," he observes (6); the task is to show how these two visions come together.

The third and fourth chapters apply the results of the first two to the circumstances that give rise to the question of love's "availing," namely, creaturely limitations (chap. 3) and the power of evil (chap. 4), and these findings are then brought together and extended in the final chapter and conclusion. A major merit of the book—and perhaps sufficient reason alone to read and ponder it—is the author's clear and cogent distinction between the normal features and consequences of creaturely finitude (e.g., vulnerability, mutual conflict, frustration, loss, death) and the effects of evil. In this, Sponheim differs from those Christian theologians early and late who wish somehow to attribute all creaturely suffering to evil agency. Although the Kierkegaardian influence is by no means absent from Sponheim's constructive reflections on these issues, it is the Whiteheadian influence that seems preeminent here. The key both to "living with courage in the face of finitude" (48) and to living "against evil" (chap. 4) is a kind of conversion, similar to the conversion recounted in Job 42: "a stunning reversal in [Job's] understanding of God" (130) as he gains a glimmer of both the scope and the character of God's work.

It is, apparently, to that sort of conversion that the book directs its reader. It combines considerable erudition with a personal, at times informal, tone. It is suggestive rather than explicit when it comes to the sort of constructive synthesis of existentialist and process-metaphysical strands of philosophical theology it seems to call for. But at times—for instance, when mentioning Whitehead's comments on the failure of classical Christian thinkers to carry through with the implications of their Trinitarian doctrine for cosmology—Sponheim seems to point us deeper into the Christian tradition to discover resources for the kind of critical theological reconstruction we need. Meanwhile, the clarity, honesty, and maturity of this unusual treatise commend it to readers in search of some wisdom on the matters with which it deals.

CHARLES M. WOOD, *Southern Methodist University.*

SHEVELAND, JOHN N. *Piety and Responsibility: Patterns of Unity in Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and Vedanta Desika.* Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. 203 pp. \$89.95 (cloth).

This book, by John N. Sheveland, brings a prominent Catholic, Protestant, and Hindu theologian—Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and the fourteenth-century Srivaisnava theologian Vedanta Desika, respectively—into conversation on the theme of the relation between piety and responsibility, or, to use more traditional Christian terminology, the relation between the response to divine grace and human works. The book advances two theses, one material and the other methodological. Materially, it argues that piety and responsibility—the individual's vertical relationship with God and horizontal relations with fellow human beings—do not exist in a competitive, zero-sum relationship. Rather, piety is at once the presupposition and the telos of authentic human relations, and, conversely, ethical responsibility is the natural expression and authentication of piety.

Methodologically, the book seeks to demonstrate that additional insight into the unity of piety and responsibility can be generated through an ecumenically and interreligiously inclusive theological method. Perhaps the most original aspect of the

book is its use of the metaphor of musical polyphony to understand this inclusive method of doing theology. The musical metaphor provides an elegant structure to the book. The first theologian considered, Karl Rahner, provides the melody line. Karl Barth, the subject of the following chapter, provides the harmony. Vedanta Desika, the third theological voice to be introduced, transforms an ecumenical harmony into an interreligious polyphony. The three core chapters of the book thus mark an ever-widening horizon of theological inclusivity: Barth introduces an ecumenical dimension, which is further expanded, with Vedanta Desika, into interreligious conversation—a broader ecumenism, one could say. Sheveland insists that the polyphonic model does not “privilege normatively” Rahner’s theology over the other two simply because it provides the melody line (5). Nevertheless, it seems to me that Rahner remains the central focus of the comparison; subsequent chapters serve to deepen and nuance Rahner’s basic, noncompetitive conception of the relation between piety and responsibility. I hasten to add, however, that this rootedness in Rahner’s tradition is nothing to be apologetic about. It is, after all, a central presupposition of the hermeneutical comparative theological method that Sheveland appropriates from David Tracy and Francis X. Clooney.

The metaphor of polyphony offers a compelling model for a comparative theological approach that affirms religious difference without, however, countenancing religious polemics. It thus distinguishes itself from universalist approaches to religious comparison that implicitly posit identity as a condition for religious acceptance. While affirming theological differences, however, it nevertheless seeks to reconcile them.

In “prioritizing theological aesthetics over antagonism” (200), the polyphonic method is not theologically neutral. The preference for reconciliation over polemic is axiomatic. For there is no reason, of course, why one cannot read theological texts polemically, particularly those, such as the Catholic and Protestant positions represented by Rahner and Barth, respectively, that were themselves developed historically in a polemical context. This point is important for appreciating a particular strength of Sheveland’s approach, namely, the way in which it exposes and dismantles the stereotypes fostered by a history of intercommunal polemic. He convincingly shows how reading Rahner through the lens of Barth focuses attention on the vertical, doxological dimension of the former, a dimension obscured by invidious characterizations of Rahner’s theology as a “theology from below” (166). And, conversely, reading Barth through a Rahnerian lens challenges the widespread view that Barth slighted human freedom (72) and, accordingly, had a weak appreciation for interpersonal responsibility (93).

The ecumenical dimension of Sheveland’s comparison beautifully illustrates and exemplifies a feature of today’s comparative theology more generally: it assumes a stance, at once critical and constructive, vis-à-vis the theological tradition in which it is inscribed. To the extent that the home tradition has invariably constituted itself in relation to its historical rivals, theological comparison is not external to an ongoing tradition of theological reflection but, rather, integral to it.

Such a history of previous polemics constitutive of the compared texts is largely absent with Vedanta Desika, however. For this reason, the interreligious dimension of Sheveland’s study is doing less work than the ecumenical one. Put differently, while Sheveland shows convincingly how, given the past history of intra-Christian polemic, a consideration of both Protestant and Catholic positions forms an integral part of contemporary Christian reflection on the faith/works relation, his argument for including Vedanta Desika in this reflection falls short of the strong claim that the interreligious dimension, like the ecumenical, is integral to it. His argument for in-

## The Journal of Religion

cluding Vedanta Desika rests on an appeal to the interreligious horizon in which all theological reflection takes place today (11). For many of us, this argument is enough. And yet the case for including a Hindu theologian such as Vedanta Desika could conceivably be bolstered against the skeptics by making explicit the reception history of the non-Christian thinker in question. If we look hard enough, we might find that that theologian represents a tradition in relation to which previous Christian theologians and missionaries have articulated a concept of Christian identity.

Admittedly, such historical work would detract from one of the chief virtues of the present volume: its clear theological focus. Indeed, one of the more refreshing aspects of Sheveland's book is the way it moves quickly and decisively into substantive theological comparison, though with a clear methodological self-awareness. The result is a concise and eloquent theological statement on the unity of piety and responsibility, one that is informed by a serious and theologically sensitive reading of both Christian and Hindu sources.

HUGH NICHOLSON, *Loyola University Chicago*.

JOHNSTON LARGEN, KRISTIN. *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ: A Comparative Theology of Salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011. x+246 pp. \$30.00 (paper).

As we near the twentieth anniversaries of Francis X. Clooney's groundbreaking *Theology after Vedānta* (Albany, NY, 1993), Diana Eck's *Encountering God* (Boston, 1993), and Keith Ward's *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford, 1994), it seems fair to say that the subdiscipline increasingly referred to as the "new" comparative theology—to distinguish it from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonialist project of the same name—has come of age in the English-speaking world. One indication is the appearance of a significant number of specialized studies in Hindu-Christian, Buddhist-Christian, and other styles of interreligious theology by a second generation of comparativists, writing primarily but not exclusively from various Christian traditions. Another indication is the emergence of comparative theology textbooks, as well as good, credible exempla of comparative practice suitable for classroom use and more general audiences. *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ* exemplifies both developments.

An associate professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg and an ordained Lutheran pastor, Kristin Johnston Largen writes from an explicitly confessional perspective. Her primary interest here, as in her study *What Christians Can Learn from Buddhism* (Minneapolis, 2009), is in Christian soteriology. Specifically, she attempts to reveal that the rich narratives of the young Krishna from the *Bhāgavata Purāna* and other popular Hindu traditions can assist Christians in reclaiming their own canonical and noncanonical traditions of the young Christ—and that both can fruitfully reshape and enrich Christians' imaginings of how God saves. In this sense, her work represents not just an interreligious theology but also an interreligious narrative theology. Late in the study, Largen quotes Roberto Goizueta's contention that the full, embodied, and affective nature of human experience implies that "we cannot understand that lived experience through concepts alone" (209). Although it is mentioned in passing, this citation seems to reflect Largen's conviction throughout that theology, including comparative theology, must resist reducing the revelatory power of narrative to the merely notional and conceptual. The exploits of young Krishna, in her view, help greatly in this task.

The book itself is beautifully organized. The first chapter introduces the reader to the new comparative theology, arguing for its importance both as an expression