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## A Review of A Different Death: Euthanasia and the Christian Tradition by Edward J. Larson and Darrel W. Amundsen

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sumed theology (p. 174)," trimming Christian self-understandings to harmonize with the practices and ideologies of advanced capitalism.

Unlike some contributors to his volume (e.g., John Tropman, John R. Schneider) Clapp has a strong notion of church, one that sees lay formation and discipleship as central to living the gospel. The church is not primarily about providing Christian "principles" to guide kings and the rich (who jettison or reinterpret such principles when the "natural" demands of their roles demand it). Rather, the job of the church is to form a distinct and distinctive people who follow an executed leader, a leader whose priorities and practices give no useful "principles" for maintaining coercive order or exploitative economic systems. In the end, while Clapp notes that Christians can appreciate some limited aspects of consumer capitalism, the overriding need for the church is to attend to constituting itself as a "peculiarly and explicitly Christian" culture – a counterculture, if you will, in the midst of a capitalist culture with its near-idolatrous claims on our attitudes, passions and practices. □

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Edward J. Larson, Darrel W. Amundsen

*A Different Death: Euthanasia and the Christian Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 288 pp.

Reviewed by M. Therese Lysaught, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH

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To read the opinions of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals (1996) as well as other recent legal and scholarly treatises on suicide and euthanasia, one could well end up believing that early Christianity supported suicide and euthanasia. Such arguments, however, are misreadings of the tradition, at best, and distortions thereof at worst. It is precisely these distortions that Edward J. Larson and Darrel W. Amundsen set out to debunk. In addition, they "seek to assist readers to reexamine the issues of euthanasia and suicide in light of the historic Christian faith" (p. 12). On both counts, they do an excellent job.

Larson and Amundsen are squarely centered in the mainstream of bioethics and public

policy. Larson, a professor of history and law at the University of Georgia and former staff counsel for the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, worked in the legal context surrounding the 1994 Washington state legislation outlawing physician-assisted suicide. Amundsen, professor of classics at Western Washington University, has written extensively in the history of medicine and remains the premier scholar in the history of religion and medicine.

The book takes as its defining context the 1997 referendum which made Oregon "the first jurisdiction in the Western world since the rise of Christianity to enact a valid statute authorizing physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia" (p. 9). The introduction alone makes this book a great tool to use with undergraduates, as it illustrates interdisciplinary integration, the fact that ideas have effects (such as how Durkheim's conflation of martyrdom and suicide has led to the cooptation of Christianity to warrant social practices), and a hypothetical process of research and critical thinking. The first task of the book, comprising chapters 1-6, is an intellectual history of suicide and euthanasia throughout the Christian tradition. Here Amundsen seeks to provide thorough contextualization and plausible theological grounding of early Christian texts and practices. He begins with an overview of the Greco-Roman, medical, and Jewish backgrounds from which Christianity emerged, focusing in the latter on issues of death in relation to martyrdom, war, salvation, and illness. This provides an important backdrop for the consideration of practices of martyrdom, forgiveness, asceticism, suffering, sickness, and suicide in early Christianity. The focus on suicide, sickness, euthanasia, and the withdrawal of medical treatment continues throughout and "after" the middle ages. Particularly important is Amundsen's acknowledgement of minor and aberrational areas of ambiguity within the Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions, the decisive lack of such ambiguity within early Christianity, and his treatment of Augustine, illustrating how Augustine articulated the wisdom of the tradition he inherited rather than representing a decisive, individual shift.

Amundsen's historical interpretation and construction is well done. Some minor criticisms could be raised: some secondary ref-

erences seem a bit dated; more treatment on the melding of Christianity and medicine after the fourth century would be desirable; at certain points more explanation or interpretation of particular textual passages and a more socio-politically grounded treatment of certain practices (e.g., martyrdom and asceticism) would have been warranted; and given their evangelical location, scripture and the early church receive more attention than Catholic medieval and post-medieval resources. But overall, the presentation is thorough and compelling, and the analysis is more theologically adept than one would have anticipated. In the end, it is clear that one cannot responsibly locate support for suicide or euthanasia within the Christian tradition.

Chapter 7 marks an abrupt move to the second task of the book, namely, an overview of the historical development of the assisted suicide movement from a legal and policy perspective. But perhaps style serves substance, given the authors' point that the movement itself marks an abrupt reversal of nearly 2000 years of unanimous rejection of suicide, especially as mediated by physicians. Clearly, the baton shifts to Larson here. He presents an historical account of the "right-to-die" movement in the U.S. and follows the subsequent slippery slope through movements in support of physician-assisted suicide. Advocating the withholding and withdrawal of treatment in appropriate circumstances as well as hospice, Larson marshals compelling analysis and attention to detail to argue against those who distort the logic of the Quinlan and Cruzan decisions to promote physician-assisted suicide and, inevitably, euthanasia.

A bit more integration of Christian theology and practical, public involvement would have been warranted in this section and would have reduced some of the unevenness between the two sections. But overall, this section and the volume as a whole achieves their objective. Both students and interested adults should find this book informative, interesting, thought-provoking, and useful. In providing thorough and capable reviews of the Christian tradition and recent legal opinion, Larson and Amundsen have made an important contribution to the ongoing debate on physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. Moreover, those interested

in forming their consciences and acting on their religious beliefs through the realm of public policy will find here a helpful tool. □

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Bernhard Lang

*Sacred Games: A History of Christian Worship* (New Haven, CT – London: Yale University Press, 1997), xiv + 527 pp.

Reviewed by Jan Michael Joncas, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN

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With admirable brevity, Bernhard Lang, Professor of Religion at the University of Paderborn (Germany), states the aim and structure of his tome:

The present book argues that the essential meaning of Christian worship is embodied in the six patterns of praise, prayer, preaching, sacrifice, sacrament, and spiritual ecstasy, all of which have their roots in ancient, pre-Christian ritual life. Accordingly, the book is divided into six interpretative essays that explain the theological meaning of each of these "sacred games," explore its ancient and biblical roots, and follow its course through history with special emphasis on historic and contemporary forms (p. xi).

What the author has achieved, however, is not so much a history of Christian worship as the construction of a set of "ideal types" by which to categorize a variety of Christian ritual behaviors. Insofar as these types are descriptive rather than explanatory, they are reminiscent of the kinds of surveys found in Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church* or *Models of Revelation*. Insofar as the author presents information in generally chronological order in explicating each of his "ideal types," the work reminds one of the kind of survey of sacramental practice and theory found in Joseph Martos' *Doors to the Sacred*.

Unfortunately *Sacred Games* does not succeed either as a work of systematics or a work of history. To illustrate his categories Lang selects examples without making clear why the ones he chooses should be preferred to others or how they relate to one another, thus falling into the mistakes that some systematic theologians make in extracting "prooftexts" from Scripture or ecclesial documents without regard for historical con-