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.

Edward J. Larson, Darrel W. Amundsen
Reviewed by M. Thérèse Lysaught, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH

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-
ferences 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 inter-
pretation of particular textual passages and
a more socio-politically grounded treatment
certain practices (e.g., martyrdom and as-
ceticism) 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 analy-
sis 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 sec-
tond 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 sub-
stance, 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 physi-
cians. 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 physi-
cian-assisted suicide. Advocating the with-
holding and withdrawal of treatment in
appropriate circumstances as well as hos-
pice, 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-as-
sisted 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 uneven-
ness 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 in-
formative, interesting, thought-provoking,
and useful. In providing thorough and cap-
able 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.

Bernhard Lang

Sacred Games: A History of Christian Worship
(New Haven, CT – London: Yale University

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With admirable brevity, Bernhard Lang, Pro-
fessor of Religion at the University of
Paderborn (Germany), states the aim and
structure of his tome:
The present book argues that the essen-
tial 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 “sa-
cred games,” explore its ancient and bib-
lical 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 Chris-
tian 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 chrono-
logical 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 suc-
cceed 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 sys-
tematic theologians make in extracting
“prooftexts” from Scripture or ecclesial
documents without regard for historical con-