

# THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

116. Jahrgang

– Mai 2020 –

---

**Lebech, Mette: European Sources of Human Dignity.** A Commented Anthology. – Oxford: Lang 2019. (XII) 345 S., brosch. € 66,95 ISBN: 978-1-78874-524-6

**Guerrero van der Meijden, Jadwiga: Person and Dignity in Edith Stein's Writings.** Investigated in Comparison to the Writings of the Doctors of the Church and the Magisterial Documents of the Catholic Church. – Berlin: De Gruyter 2019. (XIV) 369 S. (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann, 186), geb. € 86,95 ISBN: 978-3-11-065942-9

The publication of these two volumes is timely and welcome in the present geopolitical context. Their genres differ, but each work takes a deep dive into tradition to retrieve textual resources for defense of fragile humanity. Both authors identify as philosophers and have expertise in the ancient and medieval eras as well as in the thought of Edith Stein, who perished during the Holocaust. Indeed, Mette Lebech was an external examiner for the doctoral research that led to Jadwiga Guerrero van der Meijden's publication. L., for her part, had begun to compile her anthology during her own doctoral work, published as *On the Problem of Human Dignity. A Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Investigation* (Würzburg 2009). The new anthology is a companion to that volume.

Writing as philosophers, L. and G. share an affinity for certain questions and concerns pertaining to the problematic target of their investigations, "dignity." Each author shows how her questions led her to select a range of Western texts as constitutive of the tradition – whether "Christian" or more broadly "European" – or, if not constitutive, then at least relevant to that tradition's discourse as it developed historically. Both philosophers attempt to engage with legal and political texts as well as religious ones. Because of the different genres, however, the volumes will be useful to different theological audiences.

L.'s anthology belongs in the classroom and in any library meant to support research into foundations of law, ethics, moral theology, fundamental theology, philosophical anthropology, political science, and the humanities generally. The format furnishes a gateway into deeper investigations. Excerpts of selected texts appear in both their original languages and English translation, printed in parallel columns. L. supplies an introduction to each passage, placing the excerpt into context of its author's overall work, life, and times. Handily, bibliographic information appears right above each passage along with the URL to access the electronic version online if available.

The construction of L.'s research gateway is ingenious. The selected texts are sorted into four epochs, each of which is seen to "source" human dignity from its own distinctive experiences. Dignity,

as a concept, coalesces through intuitions of the real value of the subject who experiences; it is “the constitutional principle founding human rights.” Neither religious nor political discourse suffices alone to protect human dignity. L. delineates her four epochs to represent the phases of the emergence of the state in European history, as analyzed phenomenologically by Stein.<sup>1</sup> First, the “ancient sources” are texts created in landscapes where women, slaves, peasants, and strangers counted for less than “free men.” Aristotle, Cicero, Sirach, and the Dead Sea Scrolls are excerpted here.

Second, the “medieval sources” reflect the demise of the Western Roman Empire and “emergence of kingdoms centered on tribal loyalties.” Augustine, Leo the Great, Boethius, Columban, Alcuin, Eriugena, Abélard, Bernard of Clairvaux, Robert Grosseteste, Thomas Aquinas, Gertrude of Helfta, Birgitta of Sweden, and Catherine of Siena all contribute here. As L. explains, “analysis of the non-European sources lies outside the scope of the present work.” One notes the absence of non-Christian European sources as well. Jewish and Muslim philosophers flourished within Europe during the same period. If they, too, explored the problem of human dignity, then an anthology of their work is to be desired to complement this one.

Third, L.’s “early modern sources” come from the period when “sovereign colonial nation-states” emerged, with parliaments, money economies, and courts of law, and when Europeans confronted “aboriginal inhabitants of the colonies,” enslaving many. Pico della Mirandola, Erasmus, Bartolomé de Las Casas, Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, Blaise Pascal, Samuel Pufendorf, Anne Finch Conway, Martin Martin, Sophia (Lady Mary Wortley Montagu or Lady Sophia Fermor), David Hume, John Wesley, and Georg Joachim Zollikofer are represented here. L. observes that the “increasing importance of the state” brought the need to enact positive law at home and the need to agree on international law as the “known world” expanded for Europeans. Although “Christian tradition splits into various strands,” L. remarks, “despite the vehemence of the Reformation [they] leave surprisingly little trace in the texts that interest us” as a source of human dignity or a witness to it. An independent, secular political sphere becomes the basis for “the idea of human dignity as a legal principle.”

Fourth, “modern sources” are texts written during and after the French Revolution up through the two World Wars and the post-World War II era. Johann Gottfried Herder, Immanuel Kant, Olympe de Gouges, Mary Wollstonecraft, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Karl Heinrich Heydenreich, Hannah More, G.W.F. Hegel, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Hortense Wild, Ferdinand Lassalle, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Mann, Edith Stein, Otto Karrer, the General Assembly of the United Nations, Ernst Bloch, Gabriel Marcel, Hannah Arendt, and the Second Vatican Council are represented here. Characteristic of this era is the ability of “politically excluded classes to claim inclusion” by using constitutional law and the fundamental values that it embodies.

L.’s anthology shows that human dignity is the kind of thing that needs continual discussion and negotiation. There is no happy ending in the present, nor was there any golden age in the past. Religion is but one of the many colors of the discourse of dignity. As L. remarks: “Conceptions of human dignity [...] are as varied as flowers of the field.”

This anthology will assist the continuing discernment and renegotiation of dignity in our times, even for those who may disagree with its selection of texts. The genius of L.’s work is that every potential criticism of the volume simply kindles and provokes the renegotiation that is the very purpose the volume itself. Some may find the book too Christian, while others may find it not

---

<sup>1</sup> Edith STEIN: *Eine Untersuchung über den Staat*, Freiburg 2006 (Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe, 7).

Christian enough. Either kind of critic might reject L.'s own conclusion. She finds that our dignity is disclosed to our intuition independently of Revelation, that is, on the purely secular phenomenological grounds which she elaborates from the texts; nevertheless, at the same time, human dignity is also "a value that can be and has been restored by God's love for us in the redemption brought by Christ."

Like L., G. endeavors to discern what human dignity is on the basis of a selection of texts. Unlike L., she seems to already know the answer prior to the investigation. That certainty arises from the canonicity of two sets of texts whose axiomatic status the reader is expected to concede. One set is the Christian tradition, comprising only "writings of the church fathers and the doctors of the church" and "contemporary magisterial documents" as surveyed in the last two chap.s of the book, chap.s 6 and 7. The other set of canonical texts comprises commentaries on the philosophical anthropology of Edith Stein that assimilate it to Catholic dogma; those views control chap.s 2 through 5. For readers who can accept those limits to Christian tradition and Steinian philosophy, at least provisionally, G.'s book rewards careful reading with some stunning and provocative insights.

Overall, the book intends to show that Stein propounded a philosophy of personhood that is compatible with contemporary Roman Catholic magisterial documents. It speaks primarily to theologians and philosophers aligned with that magisterium. G. argues that Stein offers a novel way to resolve certain puzzles or "aporiai" in contemporary discourse about dignity.

G. begins with an exposition of her chosen methodology. She aspires to employ "intellectual history understood as interdisciplinary research" into a selection of texts situated in their social contexts. She looks for "the leading threads in the discourse of the worthiness of a man." Targeted are recurring themes that suggest something like human worth, even where the word "dignity" itself may be missing. G. distinguishes a "term" from a "concept" and from a "notion." This is necessary because, as she concedes, the concept and the term "dignity" itself seldom appear in Stein's writing. Hence, G. can address only "implicit thematizations of human dignity" by Stein.

Those themes are detected in discussions of human being as having a "threefold structure" consisting of body, soul, and spirit. G. insists that this threefold was characteristic of Stein's anthropology throughout her career: not only in the mature theological and mystical writings of the 1930's and early 1940's, but even in the initial phenomenological work that Stein produced between 1916 and her baptism in 1922. This threefold structure, unsurprisingly, matches formulations in classic Christian texts like those that Stein began to study during and after her conversion to Catholicism.

G. is aware that other writers have perceived discontinuity between the method and findings of Stein's early scientific work and those of her later Christian period. Chap. 2 sets forth arguments against that view, which will be addressed presently. Chap.s 3, 4, and 5 convey the substantive findings of G.'s research. Chap. 3, presenting "the network of anthropological concepts in Edith Stein's philosophy," first surveys the threefold structure in patristic and medieval classical texts, and only then offers discussions of spirit, soul, and body in Stein's writings. This conveys the impression that Stein echoes the classic texts.

Chap. 4, presenting "the human person in Edith Stein's philosophy," first introduces the classic conception of the human as microcosm or universe-in-miniature, and then finds instantiations within Stein's work of aspects of human being that are depicted as material, vegetative, animal, and personal. The personal is further elaborated to account for the fact that "Stein used the term person in more than one way and meaning." G. helpfully distinguishes a sense in which the person is "a given" from the sense in which the person is more like "a maximum or an archetype." The chap. concludes

with a candid and somewhat wrenching acknowledgement that not all human beings are human persons, under the Steinian analysis as pursued so far. Yet, G. argues, dignity in Stein's estimation still would accrue to entities having potential for future spiritual activity, like embryos.

Chap. 5, presenting "human dignity and value in Edith Stein's writings," is heavy on eisegesis. G., conceding "the absence of an explicit thematization of the concept of dignity" in Stein's texts, still derives "five dimensions of dignity and the characteristics of dignity" that are somehow inspired by Stein's remarks on value. The discussion is erudite, but one struggles to see how it is supported by the passages selected. G. will go on, in the next chap., to distill five somewhat different characteristics of human dignity from patristic sources: inherency, dynamicity, normativity, relationality, and unity. Stein wrote nothing to contradict that. But, Stein's texts do not support the "comparison" that is attempted, much less the finding that "all the crucial aspects of the traditional Christian understanding of dignity are present in Stein's philosophy."

G.'s own original insights sometimes are attributed to Stein or to other writers in the Christian canon. For example, the chap. on Catholic magisterial texts concludes with G.'s solution to the puzzle mentioned above, that is: How can the dignity of persons be violated and diminished in realtime, as it obviously often is, when dignity is incapable of alienation? What about sinners and their victims? G. resolves this conundrum by distinguishing between "third-person" dignity, which is lost through social calamities like rape, and "first-person" dignity, which always inheres in the individual because she retains a capacity for creative choice even when victimized. This proposal seems not to come from patristic thought. It is new, and it provokes further reflection: Why not try a "second person" approach to human dignity as well? Another novel finding is that, for patristic thought, dignity is "a unity" in a person. This insight, too, can launch provocative questions: When a human body is pregnant, to whom does that univocal dignity belong? G.'s own insights, such as the unicity and perspectival variance of dignity, need not be attributed to Stein to be valid.

This reviewer ultimately lost confidence in G.'s fidelity to the texts. The book imposes uniformity upon both the Christian tradition and the philosophy of Edith Stein, as the author constructs each of them. It was disappointing to find Stein's early scientific phenomenology distorted to make it match the threefold structure of body-soul-spirit that, for G., is the hallmark of compatibility with Catholic tradition narrowly defined.<sup>2</sup> There is no consensus among scholars as to whether Stein still used phenomenological method after converting to Catholicism, as G. asserts. She relies on a letter in which Stein scolded her friend Roman Ingarden for rejecting Catholic dogmatism, and she points to some similarities of vocabulary. That is hardly sufficient reason to side with those scholars who see "consistency" in Stein's work from 1917 to 1942, much less to overwrite the early scientific work with the later theological and mystical work. Unfortunately, such overwriting mars the rendition of Stein's philosophy in chap.s 2, 3, 4, and 5. Much is lost in that homogenization. The danger is that it will obscure the techniques developed and the discoveries made in Stein's earlier phenomenological works.

---

<sup>2</sup> This distortion apparently relies on editorial matter in one of the volumes of ESGA with a diagram that G. cites in the margin. Footnote 225 on p. 140 cites the introduction to Edith STEIN: *Einführung in die Philosophie*, Freiburg 2004 (Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe, 8). The diagram there is a revision of an unacknowledged source. The original graphic had illustrated four mutually permeable regions of experience in Stein's model of the human person; see p. 133 of Marianne SAWICKI: *Body, Text, and Science. The Literacy of Investigative Practices and the Phenomenology of Edith Stein*, Dordrecht 1997 (Phaenomenologica, 144). The discrepancy is noted on pp. 108–109 of Marianne SAWICKI: "Solidarity and the legal order in Stein's political theory", in: *Intersubjectivity, Humanity, Being. Edith Stein's Phenomenology and Christian Philosophy*, ed. by Mette LEBECH / John Haydn GURMIN, Oxford 2015, 103–123.

Both G. and L. regard texts as “sources” from which dignity may be understood. The younger, scientific Stein insisted that one must rely on the evidence of one’s own experience living with other people. That was her source. A theologian pondering Resurrection, Incarnation, or Creation today still must begin with the human bodies around her or him, which disclose the body’s capabilities and vulnerabilities in this physical world. Baptism made Stein forget that and defer to the authority of texts. It need not have.

About the Author:

*Marianne Sawicki*, Dr. mult., Huntingdon, PA, USA (mariannesawicki@verizon.net)