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Book Review: Speaking of God

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D. Stephen Long. *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 341 pp. ISBN 080284572X. Paperback: \$32.00

In this relevant, but difficult book, Long engages with traditional and contemporary theologians and philosophers to explore the possibility of talking about God. The author is professor of systematic theology at Marquette University, a Catholic school, and author of *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* and *The Goodness of God: Theology, Culture and the Social Order*. The book is part of the Eerdmans Ekklesia Series that “explores matters of Christianity and discipleship across a wide expanse of disciplines, church traditions, and issues of current and historical concern.”

In the introduction, Long attempts to present what philosophers have said about theology and language, and he encourages them to speak of God inside and outside the university and church. Here he cautions against the twin errors of making God indescribable and confining God to the limits of human language. He states from the outset that he believes that speaking about God is possible because of the Incarnation which showed that God can be limited to what can be described.

In the author’s first section, *Speaking of God in Modernity*, Long identifies challenges that make theologians discontent with modernity and move toward the error of fideism, the teaching that faith is independent of and opposed to reason. He points out modernism’s tendency to reduce all talk about reality and God to subjective perception of the human mind and projections of social desires or pressures. Without a firm metaphysic, he claims, the temptation to exchange modernism for fideism is very strong. However, a great disadvantage of fideism is that its advocates are reduced to using a specialized language that only the initiated can understand rather than a language common to all. Here Long offers a perceptive observation and lays the groundwork for speaking of God.

Long presents his solution to theologians who are discontent with modernism in his second section entitled, *Faith and Reason*. While the tendency is to resort to either reason or faith, the author proposes that both are needed. He insists that much about reality can be understood through reason, but that faith helps theologians to be open to what cannot be understood rationally. Retaining reason also enables them to communicate what is beyond rationality with others. The author does not explain how what is beyond rationality can be expressed in language, but he does whet the appetite of honest theologians who see problems with rationalism.

In the third section, *Theology: The Divine Name*, the author argues for the place of faith in theology, i.e. that it supplements reason and enables one to discover and talk about God. He admits that God cannot be completely understood or represented by words, but that this can be done substantially. Long writes that language does not need to have a one-on-one correspondence with reality and that Aquina’s use of analogy provided a way to speak about God. Long’s strongest argument for being able to speak of God is the Incarnation which explains

what cannot be understood rationally about God and insures that there are similarities between people and God that make understanding and speaking about God possible.

Long's fourth section, Language, contrasts the works of Wittgenstein, Aquinas, and Charles Taylor with Nominalism, which teaches that there are no metaphysical universals, to demonstrate that it is possible to speak about God. Though Wittgenstein is criticized for his reduction of language to games within a community, Long cleverly argues that Wittgenstein effectively demonstrated that the use of reason is insufficient to support any correspondence between language and reality or God. Aquinas agreed but also believed faith could make that correspondence possible. Taylor stated that language actually constitutes the thing it expresses. Therefore, though reason and language are limited, when reason is supplemented by faith there can be some understanding of God, and language can be used to discuss metaphysics. Unfortunately, Long's use of the positive arguments of Aquinas and Taylor are not as convincing as his negative use of Wittgenstein's argument. His first point may make modern theologians uncomfortable with their views about the inability to speak of God, but his other arguments are not numerous or positive enough to relieve the discomfort and make them change their views.

The author concludes his final section on the topic of Truth. While acknowledging the danger of people using metaphysical truth-claims to control others, he also recognizes that without normative truth all that is left is a struggle for power. Therefore, there must be freedom to seek normative truth and to speak truth about God while maintaining generosity and tolerance toward people who do not have these assumptions. Thus, Long seems to say that asserting normative truth is worth the risk, without giving any real suggestion to alleviate the fears of modern theologians of those who use truth-claims to control others.

Speaking of God is helpful for those who wish to increase their understanding of the modern and postmodern conception of God and language. Those unfamiliar with modern philosophy and theology will find this book challenging. However, those who persistently read its pages and seek to comprehend its message will enrich their understanding of God and language and feel more confident in their ability to speak of Him.

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