

**Joshua R. Farris and S. Mark Hamilton. *Idealism and Christian Theology*. Idealism and Christianity, Vol. 1. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 1-244 pp. \$90.00 (hbk); \$35.96 (paper).**

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*Idealism and Christian Theology* is a collection of papers aimed at showing the consistency of idealism and Christian theology. The book is centered around two proponents of idealism: George Berkeley and Jonathan Edwards. Idealism, at a minimum, is the claim that there are only minds and ideas. Matter, understood as an extended substance, cannot exist.<sup>1</sup> For example, on Berkeley's idealism a thing exists if and only if that thing is either perceived or is a thing that perceives. The main thesis of the book is that idealism is compatible with Christian theology, and in some areas, it might be superior to metaphysical views that postulate matter.<sup>2</sup>

The book deals with many theological topics such as: idealism and biblical consistency, the problem of evil, the Imago Dei, the corruption of the body, the resurrection, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, and much more. I will only directly discuss a few of these topics because of the word limitation: the consistency of idealism and Scripture, the problem of evil, and the Incarnation. The main reason I chose these topics is because I think they are crucial in establishing the main thesis of the book, and I personally found them exceptionally interesting. This doesn't mean that the other topics are not interesting or worth thinking about. They definitely are. Unfortunately, given the word limitation, I have to pick and choose.

In James S. Spiegel's paper, "The Theological Orthodoxy of Berkeley's Immaterialism," he argues for two claims, which he calls the consistency thesis and the endorsement thesis. The former is the thesis that there is nothing in Scripture that contradicts Berkeley's idealism. The latter is the thesis that there are some things in Scripture that count in favor of Berkeley's idealism. Consider the consistency thesis. Are the claims in Scripture consistent with the view that there are only minds and ideas? For example, Scripture seems to recognize the existence of things like boats, fish, and other sensory objects. Are these scriptural claims inconsistent with idealism? According to idealism, these sensory objects do exist, but they are not material objects. Rather, they are ideas that are communicated to finite minds through the divine mind. Spiegel's strategy in defending the consistency thesis is to

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<sup>1</sup> Given the types of arguments that Berkeley and Edwards use against the existence of matter, it seems clear that they held to the stronger position: that the existence of extended matter is impossible.

<sup>2</sup> The papers in the book take it for granted that matter is an extended thing. Unfortunately, they do not consider other views of matter (e.g. matter as pure potentiality).

argue, along with Berkeley, that the burden of proof is on the one who claims that idealism is inconsistent with Scripture. Spiegel then attempts to show that arguments for the inconsistency of idealism and Scripture fail.

It is not always clear who has the burden of proof in most situations, but let us suppose that the burden of proof is on the one who claims that idealism is inconsistent with Scripture. Moreover, let us suppose that it hasn't yet been demonstrated that idealism is inconsistent with Scripture. How does it follow from this that the consistency thesis is true? It doesn't. One can simply be agnostic about whether Scripture is consistent with idealism. More has to be done by Spiegel to show that the consistency thesis is true than simply to rebut arguments against its inconsistency. Here is another way to see the issue. Suppose God wrote a commentary on the entirety of Scripture. Suppose that this is an exhaustive commentary that tells you the meaning of everything about Scripture, including every single word. Suppose, finally, that I argue that the other side hasn't shown that this divine commentary would be incompatible with idealism. Does it follow from this that idealism is compatible with this divine commentary? I think not.

Metaphysically speaking there are two options: either idealism is compatible with Scripture or it is not. However, epistemically speaking there are more than two options. A third option, beyond assenting to the consistency or inconsistency of the question at issue, is to be agnostic about whether idealism is consistent with Scripture. Thus, there are two types of consistency, epistemic and metaphysical consistency. Perhaps Spiegel has shown epistemic consistency. That is, for all we know, idealism is consistent with Scripture. This type of consistency capitalizes on the fact that Scripture doesn't go beyond talking about ordinary objects. In other words, Scripture doesn't, in itself, provide us with an explicit metaphysical story for understanding ordinary objects, and the idealist capitalizes on that fact. But this type of consistency is very cheap. A full materialist in the Hobbesian sense can have this type of consistency. This type of materialist holds that everything, including God, is made out of matter. However, God is made out of very fine matter, whereas angels and souls are made out of less fine matter, and bodies even less fine. When Scripture says that "God is spirit," it is a way of saying that God is made of the finest type of matter. It's easy to get epistemic consistency because Scripture is not aimed at explicitly dislodging metaphysical views like idealism or Hobbesian materialism. Metaphysical consistency, on the other hand, is more difficult to achieve. Providing evidence for metaphysical consistency would amount to providing evidence that one's view is consistent with the divine commentary that I spoke of earlier. Merely pointing to the fact that the other side hasn't shown idealism's inconsistency isn't sufficient to establish the consistency thesis, understood in this latter way.

We can even go a step further and argue against the consistency thesis. Given what we know about the cultural milieu of the first century and the beliefs of the writers of the New Testament (and the Old Testament), it is likely that they didn't believe in idealism. When this fact is coupled with the fact that the intentions of the authors matter in how one interprets Scripture, we have some evidence that idealism

isn't consistent with Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Of course, it doesn't follow from this that the existence of extended matter is consistent with Scripture. Perhaps matter should be understood as something else, like pure potentiality. It is likely that the writers of Scripture believed that matter existed, however one might understand that, and hence when they wrote about boats and fish, they didn't think these should be understood as ideas in one's mind. Thus, the writers of Scripture likely didn't understand the ordinary notions in Scripture in the way idealists understand them. How did they understand those ordinary notions then? That's a question for biblical scholars to settle. We don't need to establish what the writers of Scripture thought these ordinary objects are in order to have a good idea that they probably didn't think of them as mere collections of ideas in a mind. In other words, we don't need to know what the writers of Scripture actually thought in order to know that they likely didn't think of ordinary objects as mere collections of ideas. Here is a thought experiment in support of the point. Suppose you are in a conversation with the Apostle Matthew. You ask him: by "fish" did you just mean an idea in our mind? I suspect a first-century Jew would think it absurd that this is how you'd interpret his words.

What about the endorsement thesis? One key passage cited by Spiegel in support of the endorsement thesis is Acts 17:28, where Paul says that in God "we live and move and have our being." On idealism, in order for anything to exist, including finite minds, God must perceive it. God is the only mind who perceives himself, and hence exists necessarily. Our existence is dependent on God's mind. Thus, idealism can make good sense of the Acts passage. I agree; I do think idealism can make good sense of the Acts passage. However, in order for this passage to be an *endorsement* of idealism, the passage needs to show either that only idealism can make sense of this passage or that idealism is the most likely or plausible option for understanding the passage. I for one, don't think St. Paul had idealism in mind. And I also think that a dualist—someone who thinks matter and minds exist—can make equally good sense of the passage. Instead of talking about the perceiving relation, one can simply talk about the sustaining relation. God has causal powers, and He uses these powers to sustain the world. As Thomas Aquinas puts it: if God were to step back from sustaining the world for one second, the entire cosmos would cease to exist. At any rate, more needs to be done to show that the Acts passage *endorses* idealism. Idealism can *account* for the passage, but so can other non-idealist views.

Perhaps the worry is that the sustaining relation is more difficult to decipher than the perceiving relation. Why might this be the case? For one, I'm personally acquainted with the perceiving relation because I often perceive things. However, the type of perceiving in question is different than the perceiving I am acquainted with. On Berkeley's view, for example, ordinary objects continue to exist even when I, or any other finite being, don't perceive them. One way to understand this is that if I were to be in the right place at the right time, then I would perceive said object. This counterfactual is made true by God's power. What is this power? I'm surely not acquainted with that type of power. Hence, acquaintance is not going to help very

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<sup>3</sup> To show the inconsistency between idealism and Scripture, one might also need to adopt the doctrine that every word in Scripture is divinely inspired and has a particular meaning and purpose. Thus, ordinary notions like fish and boats are not without their metaphysical baggage.

much here. It's not clear that this power is better understood than the sustaining relation.<sup>4</sup>

In Jordan Wessling's intriguing paper, "Idealistic Panentheism: Reflections on Jonathan Edwards's Account of the God-World Relation," he defends Edwards' idealistic panentheism against the problem of evil. According to Edwards' panentheism, the world is a collection of ideas in the divine mind. If so, then evil is in the divine mind. Does this make God evil in anyway? According to Wessling, what is true of the part is not necessarily true of the whole. Although there is evil in the divine mind, it may be that God as a whole is not evil because the divine mind, or the divine ideas contained within that mind, is but one part of God.

It's tempting to have the following image of panentheism: God's mind is a circle and creation is "inside" of this circle. This picture suggests that God's mind, the circle, can be safe from the evils in the circle. I think a better depiction of panentheism is that we are modes of God's mind. Think about a carpet with a wrinkle. The wrinkle is a mode of the carpet. It is nothing over-and-above the carpet. This mode is not contained in the carpet nor does it "sit" on top of the carpet. Rather, it is a way the carpet is presented. Assuming the carpet depiction of panentheism is accurate, it shows that Wessling's part-whole response does not alleviate the entire problem. For just like how we can say that part of the carpet is wrinkled, we can likewise say that part of God is evil. Evil here is understood in a metaphysical way. Perhaps God is not morally culpable for this evil, but nonetheless, God is in part evil. As some of the Eastern Fathers held, evil is a type of sickness that can be located in different parts of the soul, such as in the nous or the passions. It's true that when it comes to culpability the entire person is what's culpable, but this is compatible with particular evils being located in particular parts of the soul. Similarly, God might not be culpable for the evils that inhabit His mind, but He still has evil parts. If I can't be perfect while having evil in some parts of my soul, then it's not clear how God can be perfect while having evil in some parts of Him. This seems to be an unwelcome consequence.

Here is a second worry. According to a long standing Christian tradition, God is pure actuality, and some evil is a type of privation and hence a potentiality.<sup>5</sup> Those two things are incompatible.<sup>6</sup> If God is pure actuality, and some evils are a type of potentiality, then God can't be pure actuality. Perhaps the idealistic panentheist is ready to give up one of those claims. I don't think that's a good option, and it is not

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<sup>4</sup> Things might even look worse for the Berkeleyan idealism because according to Berkeley, God doesn't have sensory ideas. Consider what William J. Wainwright says: "Another possibility is that even though no finite minds perceive the desk, God does, and so the desk continues to exist when no finite minds perceive it. The problem with this suggestion is, first, that Berkeley does not think that God has sensory ideas" (38).

<sup>5</sup> Wessling addresses the view that evil is a privation. He argues that "it is not obvious that each and every bad state of affairs is simply a privation" (63). Putting aside whether Wessling's objection succeeds, for our purposes, we just need one bad state of affairs to be a privation, not every bad state of affairs to be a privation. Thus, if his objection is successful, it would only follow that not every bad state of affairs is a privation. But that is compatible with at least one evil being a privation.

<sup>6</sup> It's worth mentioning that this argument can get going merely from the fact that there is potentiality in the world. It doesn't need to refer to evil specifically.

clear that Edwards would have given up that God is pure actuality.<sup>7</sup> At any rate, it is important to see some of the costs or implications of this view.<sup>8</sup>

Oliver D. Crisp's paper, "Jonathan Edwards, Idealism, and Christology," argues that Edwards' metaphysical commitments are compatible with orthodox Christology, with one exception. The one exception is what Crisp calls the problem of the necessity of the Incarnation. Edwards' metaphysical commitments seem to imply that the Incarnation is metaphysically necessary—morally necessary, to use Crisp's terminology. Here I agree with Crisp that this is a problem, so I will put it aside.

According to Crisp, Edwards is committed to the following metaphysical views: immaterialism, metaphysical antirealism, occasionalism, and pure act panentheism. Immaterialism is synonymous with idealism. It's the view that there are only minds and ideas. However, on Edwards' immaterialism, finite objects do not persist through time. This is an example of the difference between Edwards' idealism and Berkeley's idealism. Thus, Edwards' immaterialism implies the doctrine of continual creation. God creates the world anew every instance. Metaphysical antirealism is the view that finite things are radically dependent on God for their existence. Occasionalism is the view that God is the only real causal agent. Pure act panentheism is the view that God is a simple pure act and that all finite things are in God.

Crisp considers a few potential problems that arise from Edwards' commitments. I will only look at one: Docetism. Does Edwards' immaterialism commit him to Docetism, the view that Christ's body only appeared to be material? In response, Crisp says, "There does not seem to be any obvious theological reason to refrain from adopting immaterialism that depends upon matters Christological. For an immaterialist such as Edwards can affirm all the catholic creedal statements pertaining to Christ" (p. 158). Crisp proceeds by quoting the Chalcedonian definition as something that Edwards can fully assent to. According to Crisp, Edwards's view is compatible with the creedal statements because he doesn't think Christ has a body that is different from other human bodies. The creedal statements do not condemn the claim that Christ didn't have a material body. Rather, they merely condemn the claim that Christ's body is different from other human bodies.

This is what I find odd about Crisp's position. The creeds and definitions of the Church should not be stripped of their metaphysical background. Consider the following example to see what I mean. Traditionally, modalism—the view that God is one hypostasis that appears in three ways—was condemned by the Councils. However, consider a new brand of modalism that agrees with the traditional Trinitarian formulation that God is three hypostases in one ousia. We can imagine this new modalist saying the following:

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<sup>7</sup> Consider what Oliver D. Crisp says here: "...Edwards is also a pure act panentheist. This is a neologism, a compound of the idea that God is a *simple pure act*, and panentheism" (156, emphasis mine.)

<sup>8</sup> Wessling notes costs like this one. In response, Wessling suggests that an idealistic panentheist might hold that divine simplicity is a contingent feature of God. With creation, God is no longer simple. One problem with this is that contingency in the divine nature, i.e. internal contingency, is a potentiality, and hence implies that God is not pure act, which implies that God is not simple. Thus, it is impossible for God to be contingently simple. On this version of idealistic panentheism, one doesn't have the option of adopting contingent simplicity. Rather, one must reject simplicity wholesale.

I can fully accept the traditional understanding of the Trinity. My only disagreement is with how the Church understood hypostasis. According to my view, a hypostasis is just a mode of presentation. Thus, I can affirm that there are three hypostases in the Trinity. I just don't adopt their metaphysical views of how they understood hypostasis.

I fear that there is something similar going on with Crisp's suggestion. We have decent evidence that the writers of the Chalcedonian definition don't understand the words "perfect in humanity" (among others) the same way that Edwards understands them. Here is the upshot: if we strip the traditional teachings of their metaphysical background, then they become metaphysically empty. It is no surprise then that we can easily argue that they are compatible with some metaphysical view. However, stripping traditional teachings from their metaphysical background seems problematic and leads to unwelcome consequences.

*Idealism and Christian Theology* explores a host of interesting topics that I haven't looked at in this review. In fact, the three papers I've discussed also explore a host of interesting topics that I haven't looked at in this review. These topics fall squarely in the intersection of theology and analytic philosophy. One main virtue of the book is that it builds a bridge between the theologian and the analytic philosopher. If you're the former and you're interested in analytic philosophy or you're the latter and interested in theology, then this book is a good place to start.