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Against the Grain: Christianity and Democracy, War and Peace

George Weigel

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George Weigel. *Against the Grain: Christianity and Democracy, War and Peace.*

New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2008

Reviewed by Gary P. Gillum

Deification has been a difficult theological concept for mankind to accept. St. Augustine's doctrine of original sin and the depravity of man helped spur on a deep skepticism to the idea that God's children could become anything like God, let alone progressing to the eventual state of gods or goddesses. Latter-day Saints have often been cautious about broaching the topic of deification around most Catholics and Protestants, for fear that our Christian friends would brand us as blasphemers and cease any further discussion about Mormonism. But the climate surrounding deification and other doctrines, such as baptism for the dead, seems to be changing in some circles—Catholic circles included.

A recipient of ten honorary doctorates, George Weigel is a well-known spokesman for Catholics in America. As Senior Fellow and Chair of Catholic Studies at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., Weigel is author of the best-selling *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*. Weigel's worthy accomplishments seem to have led him to discuss a new day of openness and transparency in the teachings of his church, which have heretofore been shrouded in mystery, superstition, and indifference.

Against the Grain: Christianity and Democracy, War and Peace is a mind-opening and spiritually refreshing collection of essays and lectures concerning Catholic social doctrines that Latter-day Saint thinkers should ponder. Topics include democratic structures, the uses of war, human freedom within society, jihadism, world politics, the future of western civilization, and the nature and sovereignty of the individual. Concerning this last topic, many of Weigel's insights should be familiar to most Latter-day Saints, particularly as he openly explores deification:

To confess the Lordship of Christ is to proclaim to the world that, in and through Jesus Christ, God finally and definitively achieved what he had intended for human beings from the beginning: glorification as

companions of God within the light and love of the Trinity. Thus Christianity exalts the human person and the human race almost beyond the point of human comprehension, for the Christian claim is that the divinely willed destiny of every human being is, in the startling term of the Eastern Fathers of the Church, nothing less than θεώσις [theosis] or “deification.” “God was made man so that man might become God” is the characteristic patristic formulation of this dramatic assertion. (40)

Wiegel further defines his concrete understanding of deification¹ by linking human nature closely with Christ’s nature:

The Gospel episode that most dramatically captures this central truth of Christianity is the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. There, on Mt. Tabor, Peter, James, and John were given, not only a vision of the glorified Christ, but also a glimpse of their own future glorification. And as it was for them, so it is for us. Although we see only with the eyes of faith, we have Christ’s pledge that “blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29). Seeing Christ, who is one like us, transfigured, we can know our own destiny. Or, as the apostle Paul put it to the early Christians of Corinth, we can understand that in Christ we are being transformed “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). (41)

A resurgence of the doctrine of deification in Catholic and other religious circles has me questioning: Will the “restitution of all things” referred to in Acts 3:21 come only through The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? May I be so bold as to suggest that it will not. Is there a reason why other faiths around the world cannot share in the joy of rediscovering lost doctrines? What is the mechanism that brings about a restoration or recovery of knowledge anyway? Is it only through Joseph Smith and the prophets? Cannot revelation, past or present, influence the modern Roman Catholic Church? What about better scholarship in Hebrew and New Testament studies, or a clear and objective look at history, tradition, and culture? Is the need to change and adapt to modern circumstances involved? Whatever it is that compels greater openness, certainly the ramifications behind a more general acceptance of the doctrine of deification would include a more positive outlook on the human condition, its progress, and its ultimate purpose for existence.

It seems Wiegel discusses the striking subject of theosis so early in his volume to prepare the reader for what is coming. Indeed, throughout the book Wiegel writes on many important Catholic issues of current controversy. Many will resonate in the hearts and minds of most Latter-day Saints:

There is something morally wrong (and, ultimately, economically destructive) about imagining that *having more* is *being more*. The Church must, in other words, develop and inculcate a spirituality for abundance, in which the solipsism and selfishness too often characteristic of certain developed

societies (and manifest, for example, in their demographic suicide) is challenged by the call to a rich generosity. (32–33; italics in original)

Lived out in the world amid the agitations of the politics of the world, Christian hope should reflect the temporal paradox of Christian life: that Christians are a people both in and ahead of time. Christians are the people who know, and who ought to live as if they knew, that the Lord of history is in charge of history. Christians are the people who know how the story is going to turn out, and that puts Christians in a unique position vis-à-vis the flow of history. (68)

Regime-change in Iraq was a necessity: it was necessary for the people of Iraq; it was necessary for peace in the Middle East; it was necessary to vindicate the fragile steps toward world order that had been taken since Eisenhower’s staff wore those flaming-sword shoulder patches; and it was necessary in order to challenge Arab self-delusion, out of which had emerged, among other things, contemporary jihadism. (256–57)

From the very beginnings of the Church in this dispensation, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught and practiced the principle of religious tolerance, despite the hateful and dangerous manner in which he was treated by some men of the cloth. In a sermon given on June 16, 1844, in the grove east of the Nauvoo Temple, Joseph Smith said, “The old Catholic church traditions are worth more than all you have said. . . . Any man who will betray the Catholics will betray you.”² Fortunately, that spirit of tolerance has been retaught and reemphasized by nearly every latter-day prophet since. They would have felt very comfortable in the same room with Pope John Paul II, who, in his bestseller *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, said the following:

Christian Revelation has viewed the spiritual history of man as including, in some way, all religions, thereby demonstrating *the unity of humankind with regard to the eternal and ultimate destiny of man*. . . . “*There is only one community and it consists of all peoples.*”

“*The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions*. . . . Those precepts and doctrines . . . often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.”³

The foregoing attitude, familiar to our own, explains a lot about the recent phenomenon of Latter-day Saints and Catholics working together on California’s Proposition 8 (which dealt with traditional marriage) and issues related to abortion. We, like they, are “against the grain” in so many ways: we would agree that “Europe is committing demographic suicide” (280), that “debonair nihilism” (76) is rampant throughout the world, leading to a “new world disorder” (176).

Throughout the centuries, the God-like attributes of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, as taught by both liberal and orthodox

theologians, often obfuscated the more important divine attributes of God's fatherhood and his love for and desire to glorify his children. How often did these theologians and philosophers write about the family or the sanctity of marriage? With such books as *Against the Grain*, it is happening more and more, and on these and other important issues Latter-day Saints find themselves agreeing more and more with our Catholic brothers and sisters. In a final espousal for the spirit of this insightful book, and to capture the ecumenical essence found in the Catholic tradition, I quote C. S. Lewis: "There are no *ordinary* people. . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses" (97–98).⁴

Neither is this any ordinary book.

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1. On "deification," see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100–600* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom, 600–1700*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). See also my earlier review of Pelikan's *Whose Bible Is It?* in *BYU Studies* 46, no. 1 (2007): 148–50.

2. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 375.

3. Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 78, 80, emphasis in original.

4. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 19; emphasis in original.