



Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 3 (2001)

Brian S. Hook and Russell R. Reno. *Heroism and the Christian Life: Reclaiming Excellence*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000. Pp. viii + 253. \$23.95 (Paper).

[1] Brian Hook and Russell Reno present a compelling account of classical and Christian conceptions of the heroic life. Taking their start from the criticisms Nietzsche launched against the Christian heroic ideal of self-denial and discipleship as anti-life, and therefore both physically and emotionally self-destructive, the authors craft an exhaustive and superbly styled study of the heroic motifs as seen in the works of Homer, Virgil, Plato, the Gospels, the letters of Paul and early Christians, Spenser, Milton, Albert Camus, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The authors' stated purpose is not to respond to Nietzsche's critique or break new ground in the interpretation of classic texts, but to cull the various presentations of the heroic ideal in order to "rescue the role of excellence" from its devaluation in postmodern culture, and demonstrate that the Christian life of obedience and self-denial is the most satisfactory exemplar of heroic excellence (10).

[2] The authors identify three aspects of heroic excellence: recognition, imitation, and participation. Heroic excellence must be recognized by the community; heroism must inspire within the community a desire to imitate it; and heroic activity must not be so grand that it precludes the possibility of mortal participation. The first part of the book surveys classical conceptions of the heroic ideal, showing how each fails to fulfill one or two aspects of that ideal. In discussing the shortcomings of each of the classical conceptions the authors highlight what they see as so distinctive in the Christian conception of the heroic life.

[3] For example, in their discussion of *Iliad* the authors focus on how Achilles' excellence surpasses the communal currency of recognition. Despite the fact that Achilles possesses and displays many of the physical traits so esteemed in ancient Greek society, he does not receive the recognition that he so desperately wants. Even the other heroes are unable to satisfy Achilles in this regard. His greatness lies far beyond any available frame of reference.

[4] And while Socrates' excellence does not exceed the bounds of communal recognition, his heroism is all too familiar to the run-of-the-mill citizen, and therefore does not *clearly* stand apart from the life of the average loyal Athenian. Socrates' greatness is ironic because it

is displayed in and, thereby, concealed by the hustle and bustle of ordinary civic affairs. The discussion of the *Apology* highlights Socrates' repudiation of any special intellectual credentials and depiction of himself as wise only insofar as he recognizes and proclaims his lack of knowledge. Despite the fact that Socrates' defense is filled with heroic evocations and comparisons to Achilles and Heracles, and notwithstanding the legions of imitators he did indeed inspire, Socrates is a hero who is difficult to imitate because we are never quite sure of what is so extraordinary about his life.

[5] Aeneas' heroism presents a new problem: participation. Aeneas' excellence neither pushes beyond the available framework of recognition nor remains hidden in the commoner's life. Rather, Aeneas' heroism subsumes the problems of recognition and imitation (88). Motivated by the recognition of his destiny in the founding of Rome, Aeneas' distinctiveness and excellence lie in the scope of his self-sacrifice and, more importantly, his satisfaction despite what he forgoes. Thus, for the authors, Aeneas' heroism comes at a cost that most modern readers, subsumed in an individualistic framework and unwilling to yield the recognition of personal achievement, would be unwilling and unable to pay. Indeed, the authors argue that modern readers paradoxically find it easier to identify with - that is, to *recognize* - the greatness of Achilles (87).

[6] The authors take the feelings of distance that characterize the contemporary reader's reaction to Aeneas as the starting point for their discussion of the Christian ideal of heroism. The authors contend that Jesus' excellence realizes and unifies the heroic motifs of recognition, imitation, and participation. In presenting Jesus as more than just a teacher and miracle-worker, the Gospels reveal him as an individual "joined to the eternal purposes of God" (96). Jesus is in this sense "above heroic" because he "converg[es] with the very source and essence of greatness" (96). The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus' greatness as it unfolds through the course of normal human events, in such a way that "the horizon of greatness is near and intimate to the action" (100). Jesus does not stand apart from a destiny with which he struggles to fit; Jesus is an individual whose identity is wholly bound up with this destiny - the fulfillment of scripture.

[7] The Gospel of Mark grapples with the problem of recognizing the greatness embodied in the Son of God. Through the various account of Jesus revealing and then concealing his identity, the Gospel pushes us to the only mode of recognition appropriate for his glory. The fact of Jesus' "radical participation in greatness" devalues the honor and admiration that constitute the standard modes of heroic recognition. But rather than exacerbating the problem of recognition, the life of Jesus provides resolution of the problem through the "simplicity" of repentance, baptism, and worship.

[8] Following on the discussion of the Gospels and Paul's treatment of the imitation of Jesus, the remainder of the book attempts to answer Nietzsche's charge that Christian self-sacrifice is life-denying, through a discussion of Antony, Augustine, Spenser, and Milton. The book ends with chapters on twentieth century anti-heroism in the works of Camus and Bonhoeffer, and the failure of post-modern culture to produce, or generate appreciation for, an adequate model of heroic excellence.

[9] The authors' use of classic texts to tune the reader to a more satisfying conception of the heroic ideal is well-grounded and carefully argued, and the model they eventually present

would no doubt be compelling to anyone who has a serious interest in classics, theology, and religious studies. The judiciously minimal use of citations will also add to the appeal of this book to an audience outside the academy (though the lack of references to and discussions of secondary sources may frustrate academic specialists).

[10] The one critical point this reviewer wishes to raise has to do with the discussion of Albert Camus' masterpiece *The Plague*. Camus presents an alternative vision of human excellence, according to which we ought not to seek the kind of standing and recognition achieved by the classical or Christian hero. Rather we should strive to remain bonded together in human solidarity, struggling against the cold and recalcitrant world. Ideals of greatness can only cloud our vision, separate us from our fellows, and prevent us from doing what needs to be done in the confrontation with evil. So-called heroic action is simply that which logic requires of us, once we have fully comprehended the various states of affairs in which we find ourselves. Thus, the hero of *The Plague* is the civil-servant and failed author, who merely counts the deceased victims of the plague, but otherwise merits no special attention.

[11] If this model of human excellence is anti-heroic, then so be it. But attaching that label obscures the profound virtue of the main characters of *The Plague*, which makes the novel so moving. Despite the unspeakable horror of the Everyday in plague-ridden Oran, salvation rests squarely in what is most readily available to ordinary humans: our bond with others. Indeed, Dr. Rieux and Tarrou embody the very characteristics that would supersede the suspicion and indolence, which, according to the authors, permeates post-modern culture. Both characters are concerned only with ameliorating the anguish they witness everyday, and they find the strength to complete this task in what is available to each and every one of us. The diligence of Rieux, Tarrou, and Grand is a call to each of us to come to grips with what we can and should be by reflecting on what we already are.

Richard M. Buck, Creighton University