

Book Review

Marjorie Lindner Gunnoe, *The Person in Psychology and Christianity: A Faith-Based Critique of Five Theories of Social Development* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), vii + 256 p. \$31.99

Reviewed by Ricky Phillips

AS A LUTHERAN PASTOR AND a student of *Dasein* Analysis, I was excited to see a book that explores Christian faith and human development in the realm of psychology. The author, Marjorie Lindner Gunnoe, asserts that the book's objective is to "examine the intersections of Christian theology and theories of social development as proposed by Erik Erikson, John Bowlby, B.F. Skinner, Albert Bandura, and Evolutionary Psychology" (3).

The book is divided into two parts. The first part examines the person through the lens of theology, while the second part explores it through the framework of developmental theories.

Gunnoe's four organizing themes in the first part are essential to her examination and discussion of five theories, which include

- (1) Essence—The characteristics indispensable to personhood (6).
- (2) Purpose—What humans are supposed to do (6).
- (3) Moral-ethical tendencies—Are humans inclined toward good or evil? (6).
- (4) Agency and accountability—Is human behavior volitional or determined? (6).

She offers a comprehensive biography of each theorist, providing a concise summary of their most significant contributions to human social development. Additionally, she applies the four themes to each theory, demonstrating how they are relevant to the theorists' perspectives.

The biographies of each theorist are enjoyable reads for this reviewer. They provide insights into how their personal experiences shaped their theories. The developmental theories were particularly captivating.

The biographies turned out to be the best part of the book. In the case of Erik Erikson, the reader learns that he always believed his biological father was Theodor Homberger. Later, he discovers that his father was someone his mother had an affair with (44). Chapter Five examines other aspects of his life. We find that Erikson had a child with Down Syndrome. Instead of revealing this, Erikson stated

that the child had died. When his children later discovered that their brother Neil was still alive, it undermined their trust in their parents. In Erikson's later social development theories, we find that trust and mistrust form an eight-stage model of social development. When we consider all these biographies, we can see how their experiences contributed to their theories of social development.

In Chapter Seven, Gunnoe explains that Skinner believed humans are neither good nor bad, but that our moral tendencies are learned. Skinner rejects the concept of original sin in Christian theology, arguing that most of our behavior is determined (126). In Chapter Eight, this view is challenged by Albert Bandura, who introduces his idea of "triadic reciprocal determinism," which involves three factors: personal, behavioral, and environmental (147). However, he also asserts that humans possess a form of free will and are not entirely subject to external forces, as Skinner suggests. In Chapter Nine, the focus shifts to the perspective of Evolutionary Psychology, which emphasizes that human beings are shaped by natural selection without any existential purpose.

However, theologians examining these various ideas will encounter some profound questions. Skinner's behavioral theories focus on observable behaviors without reference to any metaphysical or spiritual dimensions. He seeks to modify behavior through reinforcement and conditioning, without incorporating concepts of sin or redemption. Erikson acknowledges the significance of religion in providing a framework for morality and identity, yet he sees it merely as a cultural and psychological phenomenon. He does not base his understanding of human development on any theological framework. With Gunnoe and Bandura, there arises a question of whether their perspectives are likewise too reductionistic, neglecting the full theological depth of what it means to be human. Bandura emphasizes the role of human agency, suggesting that individuals possess the power to shape their own lives and influence their environment through their actions. As a reader, I wonder about the role of God in human history and personal salvation, as well as the issue of human autonomy and the failure to recognize dependence on divine grace. The concepts of evolutionary psychology contradict the biblical notion of God's saving grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus, where true hope is found.

The author struggles at the beginning to define what it means to be human in the image of God, and the book's lack of a strong focus on the Trinity creates issues for its overall coherence. If the author had begun with the Trinity, it would have helped readers understand how the Trinity intersects with theories of social development.

Robert Jenson, who is not in the book, reminds us that human beings are created to participate in the life of the Triune God. Our true selves are realized not in isolation but in relation to God, particularly in the relationships within the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in perfect communion, and humanity, through

the work of the Holy Spirit, is invited into this community of love through Jesus Christ. If I want to find out who the true human is, I look at the risen Jesus Christ.

In the Trinity, the conversation between the Father and the Son, led by the Spirit, is also a word about us. Since I am both talked about and spoken to, I am established not just as an object but also as a subject. Humans are those to whom God speaks, and to be human is to hear the law and the gospel. As humans, we are called to respond to God, which is prayer. We are praying creatures.

There is also an important distinction in Christian anthropology concerning human freedom. The community mediates that freedom. We were created to dwell in the love of the Trinity. When we gather for worship, we witness the risen Jesus coming from the future, and we hear him in the preaching of the Word and in the sacraments. We also hear Jesus in the reading of the Scriptures, and we experience him in the Eucharist. We observe his touch in the baptism of the child, and we also see, hear, and taste Jesus as we engage in the mission of the church. The fact that Jesus is risen, and that we can hear, touch, see, and feel him, profoundly impacts the individual baptized into Christ within the love of the community of the Trinity. This new creation in Christ is something that this reviewer believes needs to be emphasized more in the book.

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