

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Brian Powers, *Full Darkness: Original Sin, Moral Injury, and Wartime Violence*****(Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2019), pp. xvi + 186.  
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In *Full Darkness* Brian Powers employs an Augustinian theology of original sin as a framework of meaning for wartime violence. He values the ‘explanatory power’ of Augustine because ‘the power and beauty of true hope can be glimpsed only in recognition of the full darkness of human sin and violence’ (p. 12). The final chapter does indeed gesture toward a path for healing, but the book as a whole remains within the darkness of sin and violence, and appropriately so. Taking a deep and expansive approach, Powers provides a theological analysis of the conditions that give rise to war, the participation within war and the lingering effects of violence on the perpetrator. He draws on trauma theory, military psychology and personal experience, but the grounding resource is undoubtedly Augustine’s account of original sin. Indeed, one of the most crucial arguments of this text – one that underscores its contribution to contemporary writings about war – is Powers’ insistence that all of these other resources for analysing wartime violence are incomplete without an Augustinian doctrine of original sin.

As someone who does not share Augustine’s view of sin, I was surprised to find Powers’ argument so compelling. He carefully integrates sources to provide a series of synthetic observations that display consonance between social, psychological, experiential and theological descriptions of violence. The theological account, therefore, has the effect of deepening the analysis rather than reducing it or redirecting it with a supposed theological corrective. With writing that is as careful as the subject demands, Powers effectively demonstrates what he argues: ‘that sin holds explanatory power in situations of pathological harm because of its nuanced description of the interplay between external forces that deeply affect human willing and our very own individual capacities to act’ (p. 132).

In each chapter he traces that interplay between external forces and individual capacities. Chapters 2 and 3 address the broad, cultural landscape and the myths about violence as good, necessary and redemptive. Chapters 4 and 5 focus more intensely on the interior lives of soldiers during and after combat. Throughout, Powers integrates resources on military psychology (Dave Grossman, Jonathan Shay, Ed Tick) and trauma theory (Serene Jones, Shelly Rambo, Cathy Caruth) with Augustinian concepts often informed by the work of Alistair McFadyen. This integration offers more than deepened explanation; it generates a persuasive ethical critique. Writing primarily from and to an American context, Powers challenges an interrelated set of cultural myths about war and violence. In contrast to the American narrative of moral use of force to defend

innocent people from unprovoked attacks and pursue a global good, Powers uses Augustine to unmask claims of goodness and innocence in a fundamentally broken world. He also resists the notion that sinful actions deemed necessary in a broken world are rendered morally good. There is no redemption for violence in Powers' Augustinian framework of meaning, something that trauma theory reinforces. Powers writes:

original sin provides a compelling framework within which to describe how, at its roots, the violence of combat is a potent pathological force that arises from a sinful condition and propagates that condition in a unique way. Trauma is an important indicator: it identifies something pathological that has gone profoundly wrong in the fabric of human experience. (p. 59)

Violence reflects and furthers pathologies in the human condition; it cannot redeem or rectify them.

Powers never wavers from this unflinching assessment, which makes for a very sobering read. It also means that the book itself embodies the only path to healing that Powers could countenance and recommend to fellow veterans. As he moves from the broader cultural landscape into the interior lives of soldiers, Powers continues to pair descriptive language from Augustine with insights from trauma theory, contemporary theologians and military psychology. The result of this synthetic work is a bleak picture of 'encounters with the consuming, enslaving, and traumatic forces that bind the willing of combatants, and distinctively warp the centers of their own selves' (p. 133). However, this bleak picture also provides a broader context for individual human action and feelings of guilt so that they no longer loom absolute and essential. Because this broader context reckons honestly with violence rather than cloaking it in a romantic mantle of duty, it constitutes a framework of meaning through which healing might be possible. This Augustinian framework contextualises the guilt of soldiers in relationship to external forces and also in relationship to the lives of victims and bystanders who share this broken reality. Thus, it resists 'simple moral condemnations' (p. 177) that conflate guilt and blame and bifurcate guilt and innocence. The universal nature of this understanding of sin places all of us – victims, perpetrators and bystanders – within a broken world marked by violence and in need of grace.

*Full Darkness* constitutes an essential contribution to theological writings on war and violence. In our time of persistent bellicosity, this work offers a thoroughgoing critique that unmasks claims of redemptive violence and the morality of war. Powers reminds us that violence, no matter how necessary it seems, is never good. In the midst of post-combat suffering and veteran suicide, this text exemplifies a form of care embedded in honest and sober accounts of human action and will. Powers speaks to the deep pain of soldiers and veterans and provides a theological landscape in which to contextualise it. As a piece of theological scholarship, Powers offers a model of juxtaposition and synthesis that respects the integrity of distinct sources and still applies a framework of meaning that deepens rather than distorts understanding. As promised, *Full Darkness* harnesses the explanatory power of Augustine's doctrine of sin to offer an appropriately sober theological account of violence, make theological sense of the experiences of trauma, issue an essential critique of cultural myths about violence and orient all of us to the path of healing made possible through the grace of God.

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