

Declaring interdependence

by [William P. George](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

**Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality.**

*By Douglas Sturm. State University of New York Press, 335 pp.*

We are living at a time of crisis—a time in which the health (if not the survival) of the entire community of life, human and nonhuman, is at risk." So writes Douglas Sturm in this finely crafted book. As ethicist Daniel Maguire has put it, "If things continue as they are, we won't." This sense of urgency makes Sturm's book much more than the rounding-off of a distinguished life of scholarship, teaching and professional and civic service. Sturm, professor emeritus of religion and political science at Bucknell University, was formed by the University of Chicago Divinity School's greats—Bernard E. Meland, Henry Nelson Wieman and Schubert Ogden, to name a few—and has undergone a rich intellectual and moral journey since. Human rights, racism, corporate governance, interreligious dialogue, property, higher education, criminal justice, nonviolence, ecology and other topics receive careful attention in this book. Interlocutors range from Cicero to Locke, from Aquinas to feminist writers Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki and Iris Marion Young.

Though most of its chapters are revisions of previously published pieces, the book is remarkably coherent and consistent. The connecting thread is a "relational ontology," grounded in the thought of Alfred North Whitehead and enhanced by insights from feminist and other traditions. Relational ontology is a sophisticated exploration and articulation of the fact that human beings—indeed all beings—are interdependent. Even alienation and suffering witness to our connectedness—but a connectedness ignored. Sturm argues that a "politics of relationality," grounded in this ontology, offers a more solid perspective on the multiple crises of our day than do the alternatives he sympathetically yet critically reviews: welfare and multicultural politics, liberalism, liberationism and communitarianism.

Central to relational ontology is an emphasis on subjectivity, by which Sturm means "the moment of creative agency in the context of events, the moment in which one—each individual—confronts an opportunity to make what one can and what one will out of the give-and-take of historical and cultural life." This understanding of

subjectivity places a premium on freedom, but not of the crass, individualistic kind. Rather, it is the freedom to contribute to the web of interrelationships of which one is a part. Respecting and nurturing the freedom of others to contribute to the whole thus becomes a moral imperative. Its familiar name is love. The implications of this viewpoint are apparent in the provocative chapter "On the Suffering and Rights of Children: Toward a Theology of Childhood Liberation."

Sturm's process metaphysics also grounds an ecological ethic. Granting certain distinctions between human beings and rocks and trees and chimpanzees, the notion of "subject" extends beyond the bounds of human community. In the words of Charles Birch and John Cobb, "If we, as subjects, are of value, and we are, there is every reason to think that other subjects are of value, too. If our value is not only our usefulness to others but also our immediate enjoyment of our existence, this is true for other creatures as well." We humans need an "appreciative awareness" of this interdependence. Such an awareness is what Sturm means by "faith," and in this sense religion and the politics of relationality are fully joined.

Though process thought is perhaps less fashionable than in Sturm's Chicago days, when deftly employed, as it is here, it provides a powerful conceptual and moral framework for addressing issues with both global magnitude and local texture, and for engaging other perspectives, both ancient and new. In the interest of the latter and at the risk of obscuring many of the book's fine features and subtleties, I will offer four critical remarks.

First, if relational ontology provides the foundation and nexus for Sturm's political vision, then I applaud his willingness to "get metaphysical." Too easily do we assume that metaphysics—an attempt to grasp the ultimate dimensions and constituents of reality—is behind us (didn't Kant take care of that?). But our real foe may be an intellectual laziness that demands a hearing for a particular moral viewpoint without putting its cogency and comprehensiveness to the test.

Second, the Christian reader well may ask what Sturm's politics of relationality has to do with explicitly Christian faith. There are clues scattered throughout the volume, and each chapter begins with at least one biblical epigraph. But that is all. A muting of Christian themes may, of course, indicate Sturm's desire to reach a broader audience. Still, it is telling that the index contains a reference to Carol Christ but none to Jesus Christ. But questions of Christology aside, for all the ways in which a politics of relationality may succeed in bursting the bounds of our intellectual and

moral horizons, I doubt it goes far enough in acknowledging divine transcendence. Since creativity is stressed throughout the volume, it is particularly worth asking whether the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* can be fully affirmed by a proponent of Sturm's process-grounded view. I am not certain that it can.

Third, since Sturm claims that his approach is better than its competitors in dealing with a range of pressing issues, it is curious that he is totally silent on abortion—an issue so divisive that it tests the adequacy of any political vision. In his discussion of children, Sturm quotes the preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "The child by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including legal protection." But he strangely omits the final clause: "before as well as after birth." This may be a simple oversight, but it may also signal avoidance of an unsettling issue. After all, if subjectivity extends even to the nonhuman world, why should millions of human fetuses be allowed to fall through the cracks of his politics of relationality? If, as Sturm points out, "aversive racism (where the Self, given feelings of discomfort, takes care to avoid the Other)" is a problem, then his silence on the "otherness" of prenatal human life should not go unchallenged.

Finally, Sturm is generous in affirming the strengths of alternative views and incorporating those strengths into his own position. But his affirmation of pluralism sometimes causes him to overlook or regard as complementary viewpoints that are in fact radically opposed to his. Some actions and perspectives cannot reasonably be affirmed because they are finally unintelligible—as the classical Christian view of evil asserts.

Furthermore, to be effective, Sturm's philosophy of nonviolence seems to require a degree of consensus that his commitment to moral pluralism cannot assure. Despite his admission that a relational politics, while necessary, is not likely to take root any time soon (here echoes of Reinhold Niebuhr's notion of an "impossible possibility" may be heard), Sturm's view of sin—and thus also of grace, repentance and conversion—is less fully developed than it might be. But despite these caveats, Sturm's book challenges us to rethink our politics and rekindles our thirst for justice.