

love of God that answers the central question of the book, ‘What does it all ultimately mean?’

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LOOKING EAST IN WINTER: CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT AND THE EASTERN CHRISTIAN TRADITION by Rowan Williams, *Bloomsbury*, London, 2021, pp. 266, £20.00, hbk

Rowan Williams’s long-standing interest in the Orthodox Church is brought into constructive dialogue with modern Christian thought in this thoroughly engaging book. Its central assertion is that the common perception of the *Philokalia* – the rich collection of texts by Orthodox spiritual masters compiled between the fourth and the fifteenth centuries – as unduly influenced by Platonism, and therefore dangerously dualistic, is radically mistaken. Indeed, at the heart of the *Philokalia* Williams detects a profound understanding of human knowing which is inimical to dualism in all its forms. It is true that the language can often mislead; the frequent praise of ‘angelic’ forms of knowledge, for instance, often looks like an invitation to disembodiedness. In reality, however, the deployment of angels in the *Philokalia* is much more often a means to understand the comprehensive significance of the world as inseparable from its relation to God.

Williams is adamant that the ontology and epistemology of the *Philokalia* pose a fundamental challenge to all fragmented accounts of human knowing in a way that makes room for a ‘capacity to see the material world ... as communicating the intelligence and generosity of the Creator’ (p. 29). This is essentially a Trinitarian perspective: to be ‘natural’ is to be as God intends, to be anchored in the life of the Spirit – that ‘perfect mutual *eros*’ (p. 35). The ‘erotic’ mutuality of the Trinity makes us aware that contemplation is no ‘static gazing’ but ‘a steady expansion of desire’ (pp. 41–2). Finite beings are always moving ‘erotically’ towards mutual relatedness, to a future that is inescapably involved with other subjects, so that to be ‘created’ is both to derive from the act of another and to be the conduit of generative gift to the rest of creation. It follows that any truthful representation – and therefore any truthful reasoning – needs to be grounded in the divine begetting of *Logos*, which is another way of saying that, in telling the truth about the divine life through the generation of the Word, God simultaneously tells the truth about all finite reality.

From this basis, Williams proceeds to explore a wide range of frequently misunderstood Orthodox notions. *Theosis*, for instance – the idea

of ‘deification’ which often seems somewhat alien to Western Christians – emerges convincingly as the goal of God’s restoring work in humanity. If, as Christian teaching takes for granted, we can address God as Jesus did, have we not been already deified? But then, what happens to the notion of ‘purification’ – the need for disciplining the passions, which Christian teaching also takes for granted? The tension between these two tendencies should be positive; so why is it so often negative? Williams sheds light on the issue with the help of Archimandrite Sophrony (1896-1993), for whom the solution is found in *kenosis* – the self-emptying of Jesus. When we receive revelation through a relation with Christ in the Spirit, we become aware that there is no individual subject before history, that we exist ‘in the medium of communication’. Additionally, ‘the most basic communication remains what God communicates to each active point of convergence in the human world’ (p. 136), which is why any Christological anthropology is also, necessarily, a *liturgical* anthropology.

Liturgy is not, of course, the same as ritual. Its purpose is to allow us to inhabit our proper place in God’s eyes and to understand ‘how and why the action of the liturgical assembly *is* the defining reality of the Church, not in what it articulates in word or concept but in its character as *manifestation*’ (p. 152). The question we should ask about liturgy is ‘not whether it is instructive, even instantly intelligible, let alone entertaining, but whether it looks as though it is grounded in listening to the Word and event that has interrupted human solipsism’ (p. 157). The same, of course, is true of ‘tradition’, which Williams examines in a splendidly detailed chapter focusing on nineteenth-century Russian thought and its re-evaluation of Patristic writings in the wake of the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment. This was ripe ground for the communal and liturgical dimensions of Christianity, which Russian thinkers saw as peculiarly Orthodox and opposed in equal measure to both Protestant individualism and Catholic authoritarianism. Interestingly, they all drew on the work of a host of Catholic and Protestant contemporaries, thereby preparing the ground for much of the work of the likes of Vladimir Sergeevich Solov’ev (1853-1900), Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov (1871-1944), and Vladimir Nickolaevich Lossky (1903-58). What is important in all these thinkers is their understanding of ‘tradition’ not as a set of inherited beliefs but, in Williams’s inimitable prose, as ‘the climate of discerning receptivity’ that characterizes ‘a community in which the distorting lens of individual and unexamined craving, and the myth of radical self-creating autonomy, are systematically challenged and exposed to the solvent acidity of grace’ (p. 183).

Unsurprisingly in a book by Williams, Dostoevsky is a frequent interlocutor. The great Russian writer’s deep awareness of the basic oddity about holiness is expressed in his realization that any self-conscious holiness is a contradiction in terms. Hence the persistence of ‘holy folly’ in Russian literature – a reminder that the story of divine action in history is most characteristically realized in human passivity and even absurdity. The theme reaches a high-point in Williams’s astonishing elucidation of the

thought of Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891-1945), for whom Christians, as baptized members of the Body, bear a double image: (1) the likeness of the crucified Son, by which they are called to accept the cross in freedom; and (2) the likeness of the Mother of God, by which they are called to bear the consequences of human solidarity ‘beyond anything that could be chosen or understood’ (pp. 219–20). Thus, Mother Maria achieves ‘a fresh understanding of the command to love that radically separates it from individual moralism without losing anything of the comprehensiveness of Christ’s claim on the life of his Body’ (p. 240).

Williams concludes his tour de force with an exploration of eschatology. He takes his cue from Metropolitan John Zizoulas’s insistence that eschatology deals with what cannot be imitated, repeated, or narrated: it has not happened, it is not an object, not an event, not a process. In Williams’s paraphrase, eschatology ‘is the coming-to-be in the world of a state of affairs in which the presence of God’s act is as immediate and global as it is in the incarnate Jesus’, that is, ‘a state of affairs in which the material world we know is rendered irreversibly transparent to the eternal act of God’ (p. 245). And here, the narrative comes full circle: the contemplative life is ‘angelic’ not in the sense of being disembodied but in the sense of being liturgical: ‘it exists in the “now” of work conducted worshipfully and worship conceived as intense and creative work’. Thus, the sacraments, the Scriptures, and the life of prayer are not ‘instruments’, as we often but misleadingly refer to them, but ‘already our inhabiting of holiness and of heaven’ (p. 251). Eschatology only makes sense ‘if it is consistently rooted in our acknowledgment of the Paschal event’ and if we see in the Body which is the Church ‘neither the conservator of a fragile and threatened past nor the prophet of a utopian future, but the present witness of the possibility of a reconciliation leaving no created state of affairs untouched’ (p. 253–4).

This marvellous book is an enormously rich reminder that the solution to Christian disunity lies neither in imposing uniformity nor in accepting division; that the real problem lies not in what happened in the past but in what is *not* happening in the present – in our failure to listen and to heal. It is a most timely volume, beautifully in tune with St John Paul II’s firm hope that the Church might soon learn again to breathe with both her lungs.

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