

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Does God Care? by Wilfrid Harrington

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together for Simon . . . Simon saw the meaning of the crucifixion that morning as he had never before seen it . . . That was the dawn of Easter in human history. It would be fair to say that in that moment Simon felt resurrected . . . at that moment Simon saw Jesus alive' (p. 255).

This summary makes immediately obvious that the title of the book misleads. It is not about the reality of the resurrection but the focus of the book is the internal religious experience of Peter. In this imaginative picture no attention is given at all to what happened to Jesus. The mystery of the resurrection seems to be reduced to the disciple's coming to faith. Faith did not establish the reality of the resurrection. It is essential to distinguish between the emergence of Easter faith and the basis of that faith, the resurrection of Jesus himself. Since the work is intended for the non-professional theologian the author's failure to make this distinction could cause serious misunderstanding of this mystery. A reading of the reconstruction could also give the impression that Peter's arrival at faith was the result of his own thinking process, since no mention is made of any activity of God's spirit, nor of any Trinitarian element in the resurrection.

The bishop repeatedly and correctly asserts that the gospels are not biographies, but literary constructions. Consequently, he reinterprets or dismisses most of the details of the resurrection narratives as legends (empty tomb, visiting women, angels etc.). In this he seems to lack an appreciation of the very deliberate theological and evangelical perspective of each gospel, which considerably influenced the selection of symbols and images, and determined the nuances and emphases given these by each writer. Each discarded detail therefore deserved a more thorough and sensitive treatment out of regard for the long tradition where these legends carried the message of Easter. These were never proofs of the resurrection but signs of the community's faith in the risen and living Lord.

The work is clearly written and easy to read. The author gives every help to the reader unfamiliar with scripture by including many simple summaries of biblical history, Jewish feasts, biographies of biblical writers and characters. Even in a popular work the author might have done more to substantiate his views by reference to other scholars. In this regard much could be done to extend the footnotes which are disappointingly scant, while the bibliography and index are adequate.

With this reconstruction many may disagree. However, the courage to attempt to make theology accessible to the general reader is to be commended and the book provides a starting point for some interesting theological reflections.

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Does God Care? Wilfrid Harrington, OP. Dublin: Columba Press. Pp. 104. Price £5.99.

The Second Vatican Council makes the important point that the God atheists reject is very often not the God of Jesus Christ. It is probably

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also true that the God Christians accept and worship is often not the God of Jesus Christ. It is easy to be snared into worship of a false God, easier than it is to reject God altogether, and probably much more damaging to our humanity. In fact, the more comfortably we relax in a presumed orthodoxy, the more likely we are to be guilty of a subtle yet debilitating violation of the first commandment.

Wilfrid Harrington, OP, draws on his considerable learning, experience and reflection to present us with a valuable book written in a very readable style, and one which will be welcomed by people who are prepared to explore fundamental questions regarding Christian faith. Those who wish their Christian beliefs to be signposts rather than crutches as they journey towards the fulfilment of their humanity will be grateful to Fr Harrington.

The six chapters address many of the issues which face people dissatisfied with a Christianity of mere habit and open to a Christianity of conviction. The first chapter presents salvation in terms of the fulfilment of our humanity. In this, as in the final chapter on Jesus as *the* image of the invisible God, Harrington urges us to re-begin our faith journey with a recognition of Jesus first of all as our brother human being and only subsequently as the unique one sent by God. This makes perfect sense – it was how the first disciples came to know Jesus (p. 7). But it is something which we (and especially makers of disciples) frequently forget.

The remaining chapters explore, expose and, at times, explode pre-judgments of God and this reader was confronted with the poverty of his understanding of God in a disturbing, yet surprisingly, in an unexpectedly reassuring way. By sharing with us the struggles of our Old Testament relatives in faith, Harrington helps us to realize that our own faith story, confusing and perhaps embarrassing to us, is consolingly similar to theirs. In a few short chapters ('No Other Gods', 'God of Forgiveness', 'Talking with God') Harrington lets us get to know at some depth many of the Old Testament characters. It is freeing to recognize the liberties which they took to be themselves in God's presence, and, for example, to express their hurt and their anger with God. It is also encouraging to note that they too had to struggle to allow God time and space to be God's self with them. They too found it difficult to leave behind them worship of a God of their own creation.

Wilfrid Harrington's expert yet prayerful familiarity with the scriptures adds a great richness to this book and highlights once again the need for theologians and scripture scholars to keep talking to one another. Rarely is one scholar so well versed in both disciplines, and at the same time so in tune with the human spirit.

In particular, Harrington helps us to realize once again how easily our relationship with God can centre around our *need* of God, and how neediness, as the ground of any relationship, is a poor substitute for love. It is easy to assign God a mere functional role in our affairs, and quite impoverishing. Harrington points us in the direction of acknowledging God's graciousness and being generous receivers of it. The goal, Harrington's book seems to suggest, is to grow sufficiently in faith and

hope that one day we acknowledge everything we receive, even that which we do not want or desire, as something which we need, in God's puzzling plan for us. The message in this book is clear: the God of Jesus Christ is greater than our concepts, yet intimately involved in, and passionately committed to, humanity.

There are a couple of things about Fr Harrington's style which I particularly like. One is the way that he pauses to explain key theological terms as he uses them, e.g. salvation, creation, sin ('the betrayal of our humanness', p. 34), forgiveness. I also found the short conclusion to each chapter particularly helpful.

Just one important point that I felt could be developed more fully: commenting on Genesis 1 (p. 29) Fr Harrington shows how human beings by their very creation are destined for communion with God and with one another. He goes on to speak about humanity's dominion over creation which he describes as an exercise of authority with a sense of responsibility and respect. The fact that *adam* (earthling) is formed from *adamah* (the earth), suggests, however, that we are called to communion not only with God and with one another but with all of creation, and that this communion takes precedence over and, is the context for, any exercise of dominion.

Fr Harrington comments that the Book of Job is a radical challenge to any theology 'which tries to operate outside of human experience' (p. 75). So is his own volume. In fact, in a number of ways this book is a model for any pastoral theologian. Precisely because of his scholarly expertise Fr Harrington is able to take contemporary human experience radically seriously and, by showing that what is truly Christian is also truly human, speak words which foster personal growth. I warmly recommend this volume.

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Peace – Now is the Time. Cardinal Cahal B. Daly. Dublin: Veritas Publications. Pp. 31. Price 75p.

This booklet consists of revised and updated versions of two major addresses given by Cardinal Daly in Autumn 1993, the time leading up to the signing of the Downing Street Declaration. One was delivered during a Day of Prayer for Peace in Ireland last November, the other to the Parliamentary Catholic Community in the Grand Committee Room of the House of Commons, Westminster. They bear all the hallmarks of Cahal Daly's consistent, unflagging output: courage (in once again laying it on the line so unreservedly to Sinn Féin and the IRA that he, with all his brother bishops and the pope himself, declares 'the armed struggle' to be immoral with no justification whatever); painstaking research (he traces the policy of successive British governments on Northern Ireland in considerable detail for the benefit of his audience of parliamentarians); deep appreciation of the vision of John Hume and the SDLP coupled with unswerving acceptance of the right of unionists to uphold the union.