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Eastern
**Theological
Journal**

9/2
2023

Review of Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter. Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition*, Bloomsbury, London 2021, 265 pp.

Without a doubt, Rowan Williams belongs to the few authors who are equally known and appreciated in scholarly circles and among the representatives of the wider public. Since his Oxford dissertation on Vladimir Lossky's theology (1975) and his reappraisal of Arius' imagination in *Heresy and Tradition* (1987), a modern classic in patristic studies, he has been a major authority on Eastern and patristic theology, whose works on Sergii Bulgakov (1991) or Augustine (2016) witness not only an exceptional erudition but also an original theological vision rarely found among his contemporaries. A veritable modern classic, Rowan Williams has paid significant attention to the theology of Maximus the Confessor at the latest from his *Christ the Heart of Creation* (2018), where he calls the Confessor "possibly the most important of all Byzantine theologians" (99). *Looking East in Winter* is a comprehensive venture in summarizing the elements of the Eastern theological vision, centered mostly on Maximus, that can have a fruitful impact on contemporary Western thought.

The title, *Looking East in Winter* is borrowed from a sentence in Diadochus of Photike, which tells about the winter experience of a person who feels the cold in his back, but can turn his face towards the rising sun. Williams does not regard Eastern theology as a saving and radiant power for the "cold" Western world but is convinced that the Eastern tradition can offer an understanding of the human person, the world, and the deity that proves indispensable in the contemporary context. It seems to be not impossible, to sum up briefly the content and the aim of the work, despite its richness and originality: Williams seems to argue for a new understanding of human rationality, in the sense of a human *logos* that is rooted in the divine *Logos*, and thus is connected to the Trinitarian life of God as a plurality in perfect

unity. But the content of the book cannot be reduced to the problem of the connection between diversity and unity, as in stressing “the plurality of participations in Logos” (49). Williams also emphasizes the significance of relation: to turn outward, to turn to the other is for the human person an elementary form of participation in divine life mediated through the Logos, and to live in the world is to be placed in a “network of finite interrelation” (74). Since the medium of connectedness is the human body, the book demands attention to the carnal reality of the human person. This way it becomes possible to discern the theoretical path that the book follows: embodied existence is part of a network of relations, where the fallen state of human beings prevents them from perceiving and living properly in the reality of the world, and that is why they need to purify their senses in order to occupy their proper place in reality and to become able to participate in the life of the Logos. The inner dynamics preventing people from this are the passions, which are irrational because they keep people away from fulfilling their real destiny: partaking in divine life.

Williams summarizes the thread that connects moral life, ascetic struggle, sensory perception, and rationality in this way: “The early Christian theologians who saw moral discernment as educating us in the truthful perception of the natural order, and that perception opening up to the reality of God, were articulating the belief that contemplative openness to the divine act is the thread that connects prayer, perception, and action, and that the life of what they called nous, the sheer capacity for receptive and transformative understanding, was where the divine image was to be sought” (117-118). The unusually rich sentence highlights Williams’ logic that enables him to say that the “path to theosis is a path to rationality” (77), because it helps people to perceive the world as it really is, independently of the illusions caused by the passions. What is said about the ecclesial and liturgical rootedness of the Christian existence has intimate links with this “rational” demand.

The book consists of three parts, divided into eleven chapters. The individual units usually apply a different method from analyzing the theological and spiritual world of the *Philokalia* through rather abstract speculations based on a debate with the Lacanian understanding of human desire to a historical overview of the ecclesiological ideas of major Russian thinkers or literary excursions to the world of Russian fiction. Still, the single chapters witness a completely unified view developed from an unusually rich variety of perspectives. It is not surprising that a lot of figures appear in the book, who play a significant role in Williams' earlier books: the reader meets, among others, Theresa of Avila, Maximus, and Dostoevsky, but also unlikely couples, like Evagrius and Bonhoeffer, along with subversive revolutionaries, like Maria Skobtsova, and new literary figures, like Eugene Vodolazkin. The erudition of the book is exceptional, but never obtrusive.

Obviously, there are thought experiments in the book that can raise doubts in the reader concerning the way they are developed. The way Sophrony of Essex is presented as a thinker holding the view that to become a person is to lose one's inner defenses and to become utterly vulnerable is undoubtedly very impressive and coherent, but sometimes seems to raise the question if Sophrony's ideas are not tuned to a previously conceived idea of human descent into suffering and vulnerability. But doubts of this sort are raised rarely in the reader, who can be utterly grateful for a comprehensive, sophisticated, and rich assessment of human existence on the horizon of a Trinitarian ontology and a Christological anthropology. Anyone who experiences a winter of any sort can be justified in hoping for rays of light from Williams' erudite wisdom.

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HU ISSN 2416-2213

ISSN 2416-2213



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