

A THEOLOGY OF COMPASSION: METAPHYSICS OF DIFFERENCE AND THE RENEWAL OF TRADITION by Oliver Davies, London: SCM, 2001, 376pp. pb. £25.00.

In chapter 16 of the Book of Acts, Paul and Silas are thrown into prison, and their feet are made fast in the stocks. The jailer is particularly charged with keeping them secure. A series of bizarre events then unfolds, the first of which is that the prisoners sing (and sing praises at that). They also talk to God in prayer. They behave in an astonishingly affirmative way, as though they are not in prison at all – and in a crucial sense they are not, for they are free men in Christ and their behaviour is simply witness to that fact. Then the second extraordinary thing happens: there is a great earthquake, ‘and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one’s bands were loosed’. God responds with a confirming witness, demonstrating that they are indeed free men and making it possible for them to walk away and leave the prison behind them. But the most extraordinary thing of all comes third, for the singing apostles remain (freely and of their own accord) in the jail, and thus protect the terrified jailer (who thinks they have gone and that he will be punished for his failure) from any adverse consequences. Indeed, they befriend him and he is baptised. In this way, they ‘spake unto him the word of the Lord’, and he and his household were saved.

The essence of this story is the essence of Oliver Davies’ important new book. At the heart of *A Theology of Compassion* is a commendation of the ‘radical decentring of the self, and a putting at risk of the self, in the free re-enactment of the dispossessed state of those who suffer’. Davies manages to show how the rich possibilities in the Christian tradition for imagining ourselves and our world anew enable us to hold together two things that might normally seem incompatible: freedom and dispossession. On the one hand, he insists on the reality of selfhood: we must have some autonomy if we are to be free to give ourselves over to another. This autonomy is the gift of God. But in recognising this very fact we learn too that we are ‘co-posit-ed’ with others, and that our being is a being in relation, our self-possession a self-possession in mutuality. The world’s most essential structure is disclosed here – basic being, if you like. To live in a way that is true to this relational truth of being, the creature’s task is to live in ways that intensify such relationality, thus *enhancing* and *actualising* being, and making it more ‘dense’. This is done through living for others, living compassionately and being ready for dispossession. Paradoxically, then, dispossession gives us more being, and we become more ourselves as a result. It might seem like the perverse embrace of imprisonment, but it’s actually the birth of real subjecthood, and works with the real (and deeply ethical) grain of the world. This is Davies’ ‘kenotic ontology’. Most importantly, the Christian revelation shows that free dispossession is conformity to the

divine life. In Balthasarian mode, Davies argues for the radically dispossessive character of the divine life, in which the persons of the Trinity are wholly 'handed-over' each to the others, and are thus simultaneously perfectly mutually-constituting.

This book contains both high-octane philosophy and profound theology. It is moving, committed and formidably well-read. It is also at times inhospitable, in a way perhaps surprising for a book so concerned with regard for 'the other'. The density of Section B ('Narratives of Existence') in particular raises questions, in presenting a series of concentrated readings of thinkers in the Western tradition which do not feel fully integrated with the book as a whole. These studies and critiques are unlikely to be illuminating for those who have not read the original authors, and may not actually be needed for the book's constructive philosophical and theological work to succeed. Recognising that there has been a long 'conversation' about metaphysics in Western history is of course crucial to the book and its point that talk about being is historically-located, but the book could do its corrective reading of this 'conversation' in a more streamlined way, and one more blended with other sections.

That said, Davies negotiates some notoriously difficult conceptual areas with great skill, restoring old wisdom, and opening new possibilities for thought. His revived ontology gets past fruitless oppositions not only of freedom to dispossession (as above), but also of transcendence to immanence ('the model of transcendence which we advocate here is a transformation of the self *within* its relation with the other and not a passing of the self *beyond* its relation with the other'), essence to action, difference to sameness. He recognises that 'the thinking of difference is itself subject to and implicated in the thinking of sameness', but he persuasively preserves 'the free particularity of the self in its unscripted and joyful relation with otherness'. He initiates an exciting theology of revelation as divine speaking extended so that it becomes a 'speaking-with' the creation, and his development of this model of the conversing Trinity enables some subtle exposition of the relation between creation and incarnation/salvation that rings entirely true and is a very valuable resource for contemporary theology. On his account, there is an ongoing deepening of converse in the history of God in and with the world, which is itself a manifestation of the being of God not as remote 'essence' but as active compassion.

One of the very best things about this book, in its manifold mediation of mutually-alienated concepts, is its restoration of scriptural exegesis to the heart of philosophical and theological reasoning. At number of points, it thinks *with* and *out of* the Bible, in some marvellously illuminating meditations that are unembarrassed, scholarly and imaginative. It is too often the case that listening to Scripture as locus of divine speaking is considered philosophically questionable. With his deep respect for texts, Davies does not agree.

He believes that 'the metaphysical impulse' can be 'renewed by a reintegration into its scriptural and liturgical sources'. And indeed, he acknowledges that his whole book is in one sense an extended exegesis of Exodus 3:14.

At every point Davies retains an assured grasp of how the matters he is discussing relate to the life and witness of Christian believers in the Church. It is ethically and religiously a deeply serious and challenging book, written by one who (like Paul and Silas, singing, praying, and turning compassionately to their neighbour) listens to the divine speech and joins in with the conversation. Like them, he holds out a model of human existence that is 'exuberantly self-possessing . . . , foundationally reciprocal, and inhabiting a space which is co-gifted by and with the other'.

BEN QUASH

ABORTION AND MARTYRDOM. *The Papers of the Solesmes Consultation and an Appeal to the Catholic Church*, edited by Aidan Nichols OP, *Gracewing, Leominster, 2002 Pp. viii + 164 pbk.*

With admirable economy of introduction and comment, this book presents the papers of a group of theologians, including three laymen and one woman, who met at Solesmes in 1999, to assess the claim of the Divine Innocents movement, that all babies killed by abortion should be regarded as martyrs like the Holy Innocents.

These papers bring back, in a new perspective, the topic of the salvation of the unbaptised, which saw a spate of books in the 1970s. They first raise the question: what is a martyr? Can unborn children not yet capable of an act of free will be said to die by witnessing to Christ or a truth of the Faith? The truth of the fifth commandment is mentioned. As the Holy Innocents are honoured as martyrs, although not old enough to profess their faith, might not all children who are slain in the womb likewise be proclaimed by the Church to be martyrs? Or are there some decisive differences between most, if not all, cases of abortion and the Holy Innocents?

Two differences come to mind. The Holy Innocents were slain *directly* in hatred of Christ, and it could be said that they were baptised as they were circumcised. But it seems altogether too much for the Church to claim as her own children *all* those killed by abortion, when the parents of the great majority are of other religions or have no belief in God. Here not even the faith of the parents will stand for the faith of the children. It is not clear that all abortions are carried out *in odio Christi*; reasons for abortions are quite various, as several contributors to this volume note. But could it not be said that taking the life of an innocent baby in the womb is directed against Christ, the innocent Lamb and the Life himself? Since every human being is made in the image of God, does not everyone responsible for an abortion strike against God, so that the victim witnesses to the truth?