

chapter on postmodernism and contemporary film. Certainly, when Egan discusses the film's features, he provides us with numerous analyses by postmodern critics; yet a separate short chapter on the matter would be desirable, especially as he admits the "elasticity of the term [postmodernism] and . . . the variety of conflicting stances adopted by commentators towards the postmodern" (p. 57). We must be aware that the features shown by Egan in chapter three belong to only one aspect of the postmodern condition, which is *aesthetic* (see *The Postmodern Condition* by Jean-François Lyotard). Whether the film's message touches on the *epistemological* and *political* factors of postmodernism needs to be established, and such an analysis would be an interesting part of the book. The problem with the postmodern is that the term is very general and all-encompassing. In view of that, any discussion that aims to prove the postmodern character of a work of art should distinguish clearly between the presence of a given artistic motif, which may be characteristic of past centuries, and the way the motif is presented and configured by the cinematic medium. After all, a preoccupation with violence and the monstrous has not begun in our times. Yet, a particular way in which violence is portrayed may be an indication of postmodern influence.

Moreover, many of the ideas signalled in the book could be further developed. The unquestionable fact that the film severs links with historical reality, and depicts the characters in an ahistorical way, is itself proof of being swayed by the postmodern. Similarly, when Egan states that the "screen image often appears much more dramatic, more gripping and even more 'real' than the historical reality itself" (p. 146), Jean Baudrillard's well known theory of simulacra and simulations immediately come to the reader's mind, and this direction could be explored a little further in the book. Finally, the author unnecessarily repeats himself many times. There is no doubt that this helps us to grasp the main ideas that he communicates; yet, at the same time, when we arrive at p. 137, and read about our response to poverty and injustice, we have the impression that the thought has already been stated so many times that it has become rather trivial. In the last case, the author becomes a passionate preacher, but this seems to be done at the expense of the academic merit of his book.

Those readers who want to pursue further the matter presented in the book are encouraged to do so by the book's last paragraph. Egan argues, "If we can detect our own fingerprints in the acts that are depicted on the screen and, on that basis, change so that his [Jesus's] way of doing things becomes ours too, then and only then the film will have merited the success it has achieved" (p. 154–155). Thus, the last word in the discussion of the artistic values of Gibson's production belongs to the audience, and depends on the response that the audience gives to the film in their private lives. In this respect, Egan turns out to be surprisingly postmodern.

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HOLINESS, SPEECH AND SILENCE: REFLECTIONS ON THE QUESTION OF GOD by Nicholas Lash, *Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, Pp. 108, £12.99 pbk.*

The teaching role of theologians in the Church is perhaps underemphasised nowadays, in comparison with the apogee of that form of the ordinary magisterium at the Council of Constance in 1414. Nevertheless, this role remains important, especially with regard to what is commonly seen as the developing crisis in the formation of or transition to a mature faith in young adults; and this pedagogic theme is one with which Nicholas Lash is concerned in the four lectures reproduced here, originally delivered at Exeter University and later at Westminster Cathedral.

Lash begins his discussion by noting that "we underestimate at our peril the comprehensiveness of the ignorance of Christianity in contemporary Western

cultures.” His first lecture, “The Question of God Today” wrestles with the difficulty of doing theology, talking appropriately about God, in an environment where even otherwise well-educated Christians appear to be indifferent to acquiring a theological understanding of their faith. He traces this to the reification of the concept of God arising from the move from theism to deism over the course of the Enlightenment, which he characterises as the shift from understanding (the world as the Creator’s gift) to explanation (how the world is organised): “the word ‘god’ came to be used, for the first time, to name the ultimate explanation of the system of the world. And [when, eventually] it was realised that this was such as not to require any such single, overarching . . . explanatory principle, the word ‘god’ was dispensed with and modern ‘atheism’ was born”. The grammar of “God” then shifts from the relational language of praise and worship into the derivative area of description, ‘god’ becomes merely an entity. And this will not do. “Each of the great religious traditions of the world has had its own procedures for protecting us from the illusion that the Holy One can thus be pinned down, classified . . .”. Lash sees the Christian’s credal statement ‘I believe in God . . .’ as a performative utterance, expressing our trust in someone or something else. If we are to surmount the present existential crisis we must re-appropriate worshipful language of God, which thereby brings us into relationship with him. For this is part of our humanity – everyone worships something, whether they recognise it or not. Lash suggests that the “great religious traditions of the world may best be understood as schools” where people learn to worship the Holy Mystery, and wean themselves from the idolatry of worshipping any “‘thing’, any fact or feature of the world”.

Having sketched the ground-rules for talking of God, Lash then focuses on the God confessed in the Christian creed: Spirit, Son and Father. In the second lecture, “Globalisation and Holiness” Lash makes the case for a Christian ‘grand narrative’, taking issue with the postmodern assertion that there is simply no *single* real world of which a true and total story could be told. Against this, he asserts “the discernible oneness of the world, the interconnectedness of everything” which globalisation requires; and having considered and rejected three prototypical schemes of making sense of things (narratives of materialism, or of idealism, or of power) concludes that we need to recover a sense of the holiness of creation, as the locus of our encounter with the doing of God, in God’s gift of the creation: ‘*Dominum et vivificantem*’, which credal phrase he renders dynamically verbal (‘lording and life-giving’ rather than ‘Lord and life-giver’). The Christian story of the world, then, is the story of “the world as gift and action of God’s liveliness, of Holy Spirit, ‘with and from the point of view of’ that same world’s victims of avarice, and violence, and power”.

Holiness, Lash thinks, may be broadly defined as whatever people as a social group “treat as sacred, take really seriously, find too hot to handle, believe to be beyond control” – in recent political culture in the UK, for example, the idolisation of ‘market forces’. In the schools of the great religious traditions we learn that we are called beyond the worship of the creature, required to be attentive to the promptings of the Spirit. We need to learn to see the world and ourselves anew as the gift of God, and to see what God is like: “like forgiveness and non-violence, solidarity with victims, and the achievement of communion in the one world to which all of us belong. But this also brings us to the cost of holiness – according to the Christian story of the world, God also “looks like a young man nailed to Roman gibbet”.

The third lecture “Cacophony and Conversation” reiterates the need for the Christian churches to function as “lifelong schools” of holiness, in which we learn to set our hearts upon no idolatrous thing, but only on “the unknown and holy mystery from which all things come and to which all things are, to their healing, drawn”. Lash then moves to a reflection on the second article of the Creed, the article on Jesus Christ, which proclaims that crucified man’s identity with God, and considers Jesus as the utterance of God, the Word that God is said to be, through whom ‘all things came into being’. To be human is to be able to speak, to respond to

places, times, people, and, perhaps, God. This demands attentiveness – Lash notes affinities between “the attentiveness required for friendship, the passionate disinterestedness required for good scholarly or scientific work and the contemplativity [which] listens for the voice of God”. Lash asks, in a moving meditation on the Crucifixion in Mark’s Passion narrative, whether disaster can silence God’s speech. The paradox of the Gospel is that at the moment of the death of Jesus, in that “. . . dreadful silence, the world is made again: there is a new creation”. And we have to learn to re-appropriate that new creation after every disaster which reduces us to silence, being drawn (as were the disciples on the way to Emmaus) into a new conversation with the Risen Lord.

The concluding chapter opens with a meditation on Gethsemane. Jesus prays to the Father, and when he has spoken, there is silence. But what other word is there in God but Jesus? The closer we are drawn to God, the more conscious we become of the depths of our unknowing, our “learned ignorance”. This lecture focuses on the confessing of God as the origin of all, as ‘Creator’. As we have had to learn slowly how to talk appropriately of God, so, Lash suggests, we need time to learn that all things are created, and created out of nothing, to learn what it means to acknowledge our radical contingency. It took the Jewish then the Christian tradition many centuries. We learn this through our being caught up in the telling of “an ancient and sophisticated story, whose truth and adequacy we test and explore by our participation in the cultural contexts which entertain . . . and endorse it”. Acknowledgement of our radical dependence on God, of our finitude, frees us from Pascal’s “not unreasonable” terror before the silence of the skies: the universe is vast and wondrous, but then its Creator is even more so, with whom we are caught up into relationship. God creates all things *ex nihilo*, and the present tense is important. Creation is an ongoing event, in which we participate by the shaping of our lives. In contrast to the ‘clockmaker’ deisms of the Enlightenment, Lash notes, “mainstream Christian theologies of creation have little interest in the temporal connotations of ‘beginning’”; rather, the creation is a gift, an emergent mystery of peace and harmony. On this account, the developed doctrines of creation are about the future as much as the past, anticipating the Kingdom. Serious speech, responsible communication is what we must learn: the silence, attentiveness to God and to each other attained after the quieting of our egotistical cacophony, which (for Lash) lies at the centre of every scheme of Christian education. Gethsemane is the paradigm of the attentiveness we need to cultivate – where “Christ remained attentive to the Father’s silence while the disciples, unfortunately, slept”. He stresses also that this is not a flight into uplifting sentiment or private fantasy: to be truly attentive to each other is to face the moral imperative to the hard work of thought and action, “to redeem and heal the world”.

Alasdair McIntyre, in *After Virtue*, famously concluded his analysis of the fragmentation of moral philosophy under pressure from the competing philosophical systems of the turn to modernity with a call for a new St Benedict. Nicholas Lash has, in a sense, democratised this call by reminding us that our churches and communities should, ideally, be serving as a “school of the Lord’s service” – and that this can no longer be left only to the monks. In this fairly short book, Nicholas Lash achieves a lucid and compelling reading of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity and suggests how these might best be appropriated in our present culture. I found it extremely accessible and enjoyable, and would happily give it to anyone wishing to further explore the intellectual aspect of their faith, of what it is they actually mean when they stand to recite the creed in church on Sundays. It should also serve as an excellent discussion platform for those interested in exploring faith in chaplaincies or parishes; and for those on the fringes of the church who are perhaps struggling with an inadequate catechesis. It is strongly to be recommended.

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