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BOOK REVIEWS

The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought, by Paul Gavriilyuk. Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. 222. \$99 (hardback).

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Jurgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God* makes a powerful case for the belief that God suffers. At least since then in modern theology and philosophy of religion the predominant current flows in the direction of divine passibility. A handful of thoughtful theologians, however, are attempting to reverse or qualify that trend. Richard Creel's *Divine Impassibility* argues for a qualified impassibility as does Thomas Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?* In addition the latest among this group is Paul Gavriilyuk's *The Suffering of the Impassible God*. Creel's work is primarily an analytic effort in philosophical theology and Weinandy's work is structured by the concerns of systematic theology. Gavriilyuk's work is primarily historical and looks to the Christian tradition for its development of a qualified impassibility. Together all three form an interesting attempt to challenge the reigning sensibility. Gavriilyuk's contribution enriches the historical background of the debate, uncovering resources for a qualified impassibility in the theology of the early fathers and the worship of the church.

Gavriilyuk has two aims in the book, one destructive and ground-clearing, the other, positive and constructive. Destructively he sets out to discredit what he calls the Theory of the Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy. This theory, fostered in large part through the work of Adolf von Harnack, maintains that the early church fathers fell prey to Greek philosophy by uncritically accepting the claim that God is impassible and emotionally unmoved by events in the world. For Harnack, this was part of a larger narrative in which the history of Christian dogma underwent a steady decline; the original core of the gospel was watered down by the corrupting influence of Hellenistic philosophy. The theory of the fall serves as both backdrop and historical support for the current passibilist trend.

Gavriilyuk doubts that unqualified divine passibility is a sound refuge on several grounds. Philosophically he maintains that there are several cogent objections; he notes that from an ethical point of view compassion does not entail "feeling the pain" so much as it does responding in a compassionate fashion. Also, he notes, it is immoral to require that the one who shows compassion also feel the other's pain, for this adds undeserved



pain (even if it is to God). Aside from these quick philosophical counter-moves Gavriilyuk makes a historical claim that constitutes the sustaining argument of the book. Gavriilyuk's chief contribution to the discussion rests in outlining how the church fathers developed a theory of qualified impassibility showing philosophical and theological nuance and depth. These nuances developed over the life of the church and resulted in a remarkably sensitive response to a wide variety of issues culminating in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria. Cyril, and the broader tradition of the Fathers, sought to develop a language of divine emotions that was "worthy of God." Cyril is the hero and patron saint of Gavriilyuk's book.

To establish the Fathers and Cyril as overlooked heroes, Gavriilyuk zestily goes about to undermine the theory of the Fall that has served to dismiss their contribution. Gavriilyuk identifies the theses common to the theory of the Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy and then sets out in slice and dice fashion to cut the roots grounding it. Against the claim that the Fathers adopted Hellenistic views uncritically, Gavriilyuk notes first that there is no *consensus philosophicorum* to adopt. There was no monolithic, established view among the philosophers about divine impassibility. Rather, there were a series of debates on issues that touched on the issue of passibility. One school deserves mention here: the Epicureans. The Epicureans held that the gods were in a sense "aloof" from the world; however this did not mean that they were emotionless—rather according to the Epicureans, the divine life was characterized by deep pleasure and joy. Proponents of the Fall, Gavriilyuk maintains, focus on mere appearance of words like "apatheia" in the debate without looking to the context. Gavriilyuk effectively demonstrates that there was no philosophic consensus about the nature of divine involvement in the world or the emotional life of the divine.

Having dispatched the philosophical basis of the theory of the Fall, Gavriilyuk turns to the biblical claims. Part of the thesis of the Fall is that the early fathers preferred the philosophic authority to the scriptural authority. Implicit in the view of the theory of the Fall into Hellenistic philosophy is the claim that the scriptures themselves endorse an unqualified conception of divine passibility. Gavriilyuk notes that while the Bible often ascribes emotional reactions to God such as anger or jealousy, these ascriptions are qualified in important ways in the Scriptures. Just as biblical language is anthropomorphic in talking about the hands of God, it is also anthropopathic in ascribing emotional life to God. However, taking each literally is problematic. Taken as a whole we find that the biblical record is full of tensions. For example, God repents and changes His mind yet God is unchangeable; God walks in the garden of Eden and dwells in inaccessible light. The appeal to the biblical record shows that there is not a "passionate" biblical God and an impassible Greek god. Rather, tension on the nature of divine emotions is written into the biblical canon. The Fathers were not blind to the textual tensions and in fact developed a nuanced approach in their interpretations that tried to give weight to the truth of the language in a manner "worthy of the divine." The Fathers did not abandon the emotional aspects of scriptural terms but instead sought to highlight emotionally colored terms ascribed to God such as compassion and love.

After clearing the ground with his destructive attack on the theory of the Fall, Gavriilyuk turns to broader issues in the church life in an attempt to show how the Fathers developed the doctrine of divine impassibility to protect a qualified impassibility. According to Gavriilyuk, the doctrine of divine impassibility serves as an “apophatic qualifier for divine emotions.” Like many of the negative attributes of God, impassibility serves to indicate attributes that are improperly attributed to God. Emotional states unworthy of God should be rejected (for example the emotions often ascribed to the Greek gods). Gavriilyuk writes, “the function of apophatic qualifiers is fairly modest: it spells out the truth that emotionally coloured characteristics should not be conceived entirely along the lines of their human analogies” (p. 62).

However, the doctrine of divine impassibility is not merely an apophatic qualifier; it has a much broader reach and function than a linguistic interpretative rule. Its development through the Christological controversies shows the manner in which the doctrine emerged in a specifically Christian context—the fact that Christ suffers has a direct impact upon how divine impassibility must be qualified. Gavriilyuk’s interpretation of the Christological controversies in the light of the debates about the divine emotions is illuminating for how it runs counter to many current tendencies.

Rather than focus narrowly on individual terms and etymologies, Gavriilyuk addresses the broader movements. The diversity of evidence the book draws from is impressive; it includes paschal sermons, the theology of martyrdom, pronouncements from church councils, scriptural exegesis, passages from the liturgy and other materials spanning many centuries. Though the doctrinal issues do receive the bulk of the treatment, the issue is set in a wider context than just the major doctrinal debates.

Whereas the theory of the Fall has traditionally looked to the heretics as affirming divine passibility (e.g., the theopaschites), Gavriilyuk’s twist on the matter uncovers elements of unqualified divine impassibility in the thought of the heretics. Gavriilyuk notes how Arianism was concerned to avoid the scandal of the cross. Arius’ claim that it was inappropriate for the high God to suffer fits well with the claim that Christ “an intermediate being” suffers. There is a similar conjunction of beliefs (oddly enough) in docetism; where Docetic texts have Jesus dancing above the cross while a phantom is crucified by unwitting Romans—once again the scandal of suffering on the cross is distanced from the divine life.

Similar motivations may also have moved Nestorius much later. One of the frequent charges made by Nestorius against Cyril is that Cyril is a theopaschite. Gavriilyuk notes that by the time of Nestorius the theological sophistication has become finely nuanced. Part of the issue concerns the communication of attributes among the Holy Trinity. Nestorius is willing to say that divine attributes can be affirmed of the human Christ but he will not allow attributing the human characteristics of weakness to the divine, so that it would be inappropriate to say that the divine suffers. Out of the crucible of the Christological debates arose a qualified impassibility culminating in Cyril’s phrase “the impassible suffers” (*apathos epathein*). Nestorius’ main argument against Cyril was that to claim that the impassible suffers is a blatant contradiction; Nestorius believed that a contradiction could be avoided by maintaining a distinction

between Christ's divine and human nature. Cyril's concern for the unity of Christ's person are well known; he rejects this type of solution, holding that the unity of the person Christ allows that the human attributes of Jesus can also be attributed to the divine so that it is appropriate to say that in Christ, God suffers. Gavriilyuk develops the nuances of this position far more than can be elaborated here; however, Cyril's position ends up being something like this: God does not suffer in the divine nature or "nakedly" (*gymnos*). However, in the person of Christ, God does allow sufferings to come upon him and truly to become God's own. In Christ's divine self-limitation it can be said that God suffers. Suffering then is part of the economy of God's relation to the world rather than an expression of divine nature.

Gavriilyuk's book joins other recent books arguing for qualified passibility adding historical nuance to positions that have perhaps been both mischaracterized and unfairly dismissed. Gavriilyuk's book effectively undercuts much of the historical case against qualified impassibility and here the work shines brightest. Championing the orthodox case, he recovers a viable aspect of the tradition. However, since the book ends with Cyril it does not set up a dialogue with the most notable proponent of contemporary thought on the issue of God's suffering, Jurgen Moltmann. Gavriilyuk's book sets the stage for a comparison between Moltmann and Cyril. One question begs to be addressed: is Cyril's picture of the suffering of God in Christ an adequate response to the sufferings of the modern world? Gavriilyuk presents us with the tantalizing notion that this modern quandary has a rich, fruitful response dwelling within the Christian tradition.

Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian, edited by Paul Helm and Oliver D. Crisp. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003. Pp. xvi and 165. \$99.95 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper).

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Given the relative lack of philosophical attention amid the more general proliferation of scholarship in the humanities on Edwards, the efforts of the ten contributors to this collection of essays are timely. Published on the tercentenary date of Edwards' birth, the introduction to the collection states that it addresses the need for further reflection on the possible nexus of theologians' and philosophers' work on Edwards. The collection, in my judgment, begins to fulfill this need, though in a piecemeal and limited manner. Quite apart from its overall impact, *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian* contains a number of individual essays of significant interest to those concerned with philosophical and systematic theology. The collection contains essays that consider a variety of traditional theological doctrines and philosophical topics. Some of the essays concern historical or hermeneutic clarification, while others deal with the constructive task of defending or critiquing Edwardsian positions.