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Book Review: Christ And Horrors: The Coherence Of Christology

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BOOK REVIEWS

Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology, by Marilyn McCord Adams. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. ix + 331. \$85 (cloth), \$29.99 (paper).

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This book is in the series *Current Issues in Theology*, which has as its main audience “upper-undergraduate and graduate students of theology, as well as . . . Christian teachers and church professionals.” Perhaps this choice of audience explains why the book is rather long on historical presentation, particularly of medieval Latin theologians (the usual suspects, except for one Aelred of Rievaulx), and relatively short on conceptual and argumentative detail. The book’s main idea is that a Chalcedonian Christology, which affirms the metaphysical thesis that Christ is one person but has a divine nature and a human nature (much like our human nature), yields a solution to the problem of horrendous evils.

The problem of horrendous evils is just the problem of “evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) have positive meaning for him/her on the whole” (p. 32). Rape and torture are paradigm cases. Adams claims that “traditional free-will approaches—with their move to shift responsibility and/or blame for evil away from God and onto personal creatures—are stalemated by horrendous evil.” The ground offered for this claim is: “Human radical vulnerability to horrors cannot have *its origin* in misused created freedom, because—even if one accepted the story of Adam’s fall as historical (which I do not)—the way it is told, humans were radically vulnerable to horrors from the beginning, even in Eden” (p. 36).

Two considerations challenge Adams’s portrait at the start. First, if “traditional free-will approaches” include Alvin Plantinga’s free-will defense, which is the most rigorously developed free-will approach to date, then the charge of stalemate is misplaced. The free-will defense is *not* offered by Plantinga as a theodicy intended to explain or justify divine permission of evil, including horrendous evil. It is offered instead as a consistency argument against the charge of J. L. Mackie and others that theism is inconsistent with acknowledgement of the world’s evil. Second, if vulnerability is susceptibility, then a modal confusion threatens the portrait, given the distinction



between human vulnerability to horrors and actual human (experienced) horrors. It is logically possible that humans are vulnerable to horrors but do not actually experience those horrors (say, because the horrors are not actualized). So, the main problem is not in human vulnerability to horrors, but is rather in human experience of actual horrors. If one insists that human vulnerability to horrors is itself evil, then it is unclear that one can say that the creation of this world was good before the human fall (since Adam was vulnerable to evil before the fall), despite Adams's (not Adam's) suggestion to the contrary (p. 49). At least, much more explanation is needed here.

Divine love, according to many theologians and philosophers of religion, must allow for the real possibility of human rebellion if it is to allow for genuine human agency in relation to divine reality. Otherwise, human wills would be restricted in a way that blocks a kind of free agency needed for robust love in relationship with God. Even so, God's allowing for human rebellion and for horrifying human suffering does not underwrite Adams's talk (which sounds Calvinist) of "the horrors that God has perpetrated on us" or of Jesus as "a perpetrator of horrors" (pp. 41, 71; cf. p. 274). God's *allowing for human susceptibility* to horrors is one thing, and it is arguably required by robust love in divine-human relationships; God's "perpetrating" horrors on humans would be something else, and it would at least suggest that God causes evil and thus falls short of moral perfection and worthiness of worship. Horrors, recall, are "evils," and moral perfection does not allow one (even God) to do evil that good may come. Many readers will remain puzzled at this point.

Adams offers the Chalcedonian Christ as the God-man who supplies three stages of horror-defeat. In her words:

(1) What Divine horror-participation does is to turn merely human horror-participation into occasions of personal intimacy with God. I call this *Stage-I* horror-defeat . . . (2) Because we are developmental creatures whose meaning-making capacities are easily damaged and distorted in a material world such as this, because horrors at best stump and at worst shatter our abilities to make positive sense out of our lives, our meaning-making capacities require healing and coaching. I call this *Stage-II* horror-defeat. (3) Finally, the plot cannot really resolve into a happy ending unless the relation of embodied persons to our material environment is renegotiated so that we are no longer radically vulnerable to horrors. I call this *Stage-III* horror-defeat. (pp. 47–48)

Adams denies that human powers are adequate to defeat horrors and restore a person after participation in horrors. Divine power is needed.

Enter the Chalcedonian Christ. According to Adams: "Christ effects Stage-I horror defeat primarily through what He does and suffers in His human nature. Christ effects Stage-II and Stage-III horror-defeat primarily through His Divine nature but *manifests* them in His human nature" (p. 167). One big question is, of course: How? Part of the answer offered is:

Christ is the One in Whom God's friendliness towards the human race is integrated. Christ is the One Who shares our human nature.

It is within the framework of His human personality that God especially befriends the whole human race, not least by sharing both our vulnerability to and our actual participation in horrors. Christ befriends us in a more intimate way through His Divine nature, through psychological-sense personal omnipresence and functional collaboration: I-not-I-but Christ. "What a friend we have in Jesus!" (pp. 167–168).

This line of explanation concludes with a long list of quotations from Julian of Norwich on "Mother Jesus" as "the one in Whom God's mothering functions are united" (pp. 168–169).

The key assumption is that the participation of the God-Man in human horrors can defeat the power of those horrors to rob a life of positive meaning. The corresponding proposal is evidently that the offered friendship with God (and all this eventually involves, including bodily resurrection) can make human life worthwhile, horrors notwithstanding. This approach is not offered as a theodicy, "because God has no obligations to creatures and hence no need to *justify* Divine actions to us." The ultimate ground offered is: "Personal though God is, the metaphysical size-gap is too big for God to be drawn down into the network of rights and obligations that bind together merely human beings" (p. 43). Adams's God thus emerges as a God beyond moral obligation toward humans, even though it's altogether unclear why we should think that "the *metaphysical size-gap*" (is that a power gap?) between God and human entails a relevant difference concerning *moral* obligations.

At this point we lose any moral grip on what Adams means by the preminent title "God." The best way to understand the idea of the God and Father of Jesus is, in keeping with the Sermon on the Mount, as the one God worthy of worship in virtue of moral perfection, the same perfection required of followers of Jesus in virtue of required enemy-love (Matt. 5:43–48). If God is not morally obligated to love God's enemies (as the followers of Jesus are obligated, according to the Sermon on the Mount), then this God is not the God and Father of Jesus, and (in addition) is not morally perfect or worthy of worship. In short, this God is not the true, worship-worthy God manifested by Jesus. In offering a God beyond moral obligation toward humans, Adams offers a God unworthy of the title "God," which, properly understood, connotes worthiness of worship and thus moral perfection.

If "God" is beyond moral obligation toward humans, then it is unclear why one should even bother with a treatment of evil that proposes the defeat of horrors by the "God"-Man. We might as well just acknowledge that "God" (if "God" exists) is beyond moral obligation toward us, and then be done with the whole matter. At least, the whole effort loses its moral relevance given that dubious assumption. Consider how this result bears on Adams's universalist thesis regarding salvation of humans: "For God to succeed, God has to defeat horrors for everyone. . . . To be good to us, God will have to establish and fit us all for wholesome society" (p. 230). A natural reading of this thesis finds a moral duty of God toward humans lurking in the background, particularly if the thesis concerns the moral success and goodness of God toward humans. Even so, the thesis is misguided.

Part of God's being "good to us" includes God's not depersonalizing us by robbing us of our volitional agency.

Some people, including Thomas Nagel according to his published writing, do not want to live in a universe governed by God, and they have this striking want resolutely, after careful consideration. God would not be good at all in suppressing their personal agency in this regard; in fact, God would then be a depersonalizing tyrant. If we hold, however, that God has no moral obligations toward human, we will then be open to holding that God need not respect human agency or robust, freedom-based love among and toward humans at all. We then risk obscuring the vast difference between a morally perfect God worthy of worship and a depersonalizing tyrant (regardless of that tendency in various medieval and later Reformed theologians). That would be a horror indeed. We all need a straightforward conception of God that clearly defeats that horror. Otherwise, an account of horror-defeat will seem to be a parlor game at best or, at worst, our alleged horror-defeater will be the worst Horror.

The apostle Paul is right in suggesting that this world has been subjected to frustration and futility by God, in divine hope that people will enter into "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:20–21). Even so, his God, in honoring "glorious freedom," does not rob people of their volitional agency. Otherwise, there would be no agents to enjoy the "glorious freedom" uniting the children of God. We still lack an account of why God's subjecting creation to futility or defeating horrors is at times and places so humanly painful, even crushing. If the closing chapters of the book of Job are on the right track, we should not hold our collective breath while waiting for the account. We may not be up to an account, or at least God may have no good purpose served by offering one to us now. Still, we can take some comfort in the fact that our having conclusive evidence of divine reality does not require our having any such account, and, in this horror-drenched world, we should take all the good comfort we can get.

Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity, by Rick Anthony Furtak. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. Pp. xii + 236. \$45.00 (hardback), \$22.00 (paper).

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This is a beautifully revised University of Chicago dissertation. If, in a dissertation topic, one is looking for something that connects richly with a current research focus (not to say craze) that is at the same time widely interdisciplinary, nicely matched with an interesting historical figure who has not yet been much exploited in that connection, and of intrinsic philosophical interest and human importance, it is hard to imagine being more successful than Rick Anthony Furtak in picking a dissertation topic. Emotions (even the cool and calm ones) are currently hot in academic life, and Søren Kierkegaard has much to say about them that is deep and interesting and not found elsewhere.