

Reviews

THE SUFFERING OF THE IMPASSIBLE GOD: THE DIALECTICS OF PATRISTIC THOUGHT by Paul L Gavriilyuk, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, Pp. xii+210, £45.00 hbk.*

Gavriilyuk begins his work by stating the obvious contemporary theological fact: 'With a few significant exceptions, modern theologians advocate the claim that God suffers' (p. 1). There is a variety of inter-related reasons for arguing for such a position, but Gavriilyuk focuses on one of the central and universal claims of this contemporary phenomenon, that is, that the Fathers of the Church too closely allied themselves to the god/s of Greek philosophy and in so doing forsook the God of the Bible, or what Gavriilyuk calls 'The Theory of Theology's Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy' (p. 5). His contention, and so purpose of this book, is to demonstrate that such a theory is utterly naïve in its historical foundation, absolutely deceptive in its philosophical tenets, and entirely misguided in its understanding and interpreting of the Christian gospel. Gavriilyuk rightly perceives that the Incarnation is the hermeneutical key to the Fathers' notion of God, and it is precisely the Incarnation that then became the basis of their rejection of all popular pagan notions of God as well as the more sophisticated Greek philosophical notions of God (see p. 18).

In his first chapter Gavriilyuk very astutely demonstrates that, contrary to the simplistic and so deceptive contemporary perception, the multiplicity of Greek philosophical schools did not themselves hold a common understanding of God's impassibility or passibility. Gavriilyuk convincingly argues that the Fathers never sanctioned or owned any of these conflicting views of God, but rather were guided by the living and active God of the Bible, particularly by the revelation that God did actually become man. Thus, Gavriilyuk concludes: 'The Theory of Theology's Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy must be once and for all buried with honours, as one of the most enduring and illuminating mistakes among the interpretations of the development of Christian doctrine' (p. 46). In subsequent chapters Gavriilyuk examines the various Fathers and the controversies in which they were embroiled. For example: 'By calling God "impassible" Justin and other Apologists were clearing the decks of popular theological discourse in order to make space for the God-befitting emotionally coloured characteristics such as mercy, love and compassion' (p. 51). Moreover, impassibility, among the Fathers, rather than being perceived as a negative virtue that forces God to be aloof and disinterested, actually frees him of 'uncontrollable vengeance, that repentant sinners may approach him without despair. Far from being a barrier to divine care and loving-kindness, divine impassibility is their very foundation' (p. 62).

Gavriilyuk astutely grasps that all the major Christian Trinitarian and Christological heresies were actually those that gave too much credence to false philosophical notions. The Docetists denied the reality of the humanity of Christ precisely because such a passible humanity would jeopardize the divine transcendent immutable perfection. Yet the orthodox defenders, such as Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus, while upholding God's unchanging love, argued that faith demanded that such a God did actually take-on authentic flesh with all of its passible expressions (see chapter 3). In his excellent chapter on Arianism, Gavriilyuk clearly demonstrates that the Arian claim that the Son was a creature rested not only on the anthropomorphic idea that 'generation' implied a mutable and passible change within the

Godhead, but equally, and more so, that if the Son did actually take-on flesh, then he could not be truly divine. 'The passible Son was inferior in essence to the impassible Father in that he was (a) generated, and (b) subject to suffering' (p. 130). They may have wanted to ensure that the Son actually suffered and died and so lived an authentic human life, but in so pursuing this course the Arians were adamant that the Son must therefore not be truly God. It was merely the logic of the Docetists in reverse. Gavriyuk rightly points out that it was the pro-Nicenes who felt the problem more intensely because it was they who preserved the mystery – the transcendent God who is immutably perfect and impassibly loving is the same God who entered time and history as a man, and as a man lived a changeable and passible life.

The culmination of this Christian understanding of God is found within the Nestorian controversy. Nestorius was more ardently concerned with preserving God's impassibility than, contrary to much contemporary opinion, with maintaining Christ's authentic humanity. This is why all passible attributes must be predicated of the man Jesus and not of the divine Son. Thus Gavriyuk concludes that Nestorian theology was very similar to Arian theology. 'For both parties, despite their profound Christological differences, the divine impassibility precluded God's direct involvement in everything related to the created order, especially the experiences that indicated human weakness' (p. 144). Moreover, while he upheld the impassible perfection of the Son's divine nature, Cyril recognised that Nicaea demanded that the Son who was *homoousion* with the Father was the same Son who truly became man and so was born, suffered, died and was buried. These are not the thoughts of a Greek philosopher, but a profession of biblical faith, one which knew that God was indeed completely other than all he created, and yet could act in time and history in all his complete otherness – the Incarnation being the ultimate expression of this divine ability. Moreover, Cyril realised that it was the passible suffering of the Son as man that was redemptive and not, unlike the contemporary passibilists, some divine passible suffering. 'The presupposition that the divine nature could itself suffer renders the assumption of humanity superfluous. If God could suffer as humans do without assuming humanity, the incarnation would be unnecessary' (p. 159).

While there are some minor points that I would argue with, Gavriyuk has written an excellent book, one that is both scholarly and clear. He 'has attempted to debunk the Fall Theory once and for all' (p. 179), and I believe that he has succeeded. The problem is that those who are 'debunked' rarely realise that such has been done to them. Yet it is indeed heartening to find a book that has done so much to redeem the intellectual integrity and, more so, to enhance the authentic faith of the Fathers of the Church.

THOMAS G WEINANDY OFM CAP.

FEMINISM AND THEOLOGY edited by Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton, *Oxford Readings in Theology*, OUP, Oxford, 2003, Pp. 396, £20 pbk.

WOMEN IN CHRIST: TOWARD A NEW FEMINISM edited by Michele M. Schumacher, *William B. Eerdmans*, Grand Rapids, 2004, Pp. 358, \$38 pbk.

Upon completing these two books, I have read six books on feminist theology, all but one at the behest of book review editors. Both compilations name a 1960 article by Judith Plaskow as the originator of the editorial prejudice that women experience a special interest in 'women's experience.' It's a circular assumption which many young women entering the profession of theology have met in their Heads of Department, who require them to teach courses on a topic in which they hitherto had no knowledge or interest. "No man," they say, "would be made to teach a course on 'men's theology'"; a longer perspective enables one to add, "no man would be