

BOOK REVIEWS

Paul S. Fiddes, *Iris Murdoch and the Others: A Writer in Dialogue with Theology*.**(London: T&T Clark, 2021), pp. x + 220. \$115.00**

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Paul Fiddes is a Fellow of the British Academy, Professor of Systematic Theology at Oxford, and Principal Emeritus of Regent's Park College. He is a prolific author of monographs, essay collections, four jointly written volumes, some 150 articles and one novel (*The Unicorn Dies*, 2019). Although his prodigious *curriculum vitae* has been very much grounded in modern theology, it is clear that he has also been in long and open 'dialogue' with literature, as is evident most recently in his book-length studies of Shakespeare (2021), Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis (2022) and novelist-philosopher Iris Murdoch (2019).

Fiddes' thoughts on the latter have been developing over the years, with four current chapters the result of earlier material now reworked and expanded. Beyond this specific revision, however, there is abundant evidence of years of careful reading and thought. This is true not only of his consideration of Murdoch's 26 novels – the focus of his attention in this book – but of her provocative four volumes of philosophical non-fiction, most massively found in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). One senses he has spent decades reading her for pleasure as well as for whatever intellectual or professional purpose. Over Murdoch's various kinds of writing, he shows a commanding familiarity and ease.

The same could be said of his concise treatment of the theological 'Others' he brings into contact with Murdoch, either on the basis of some demonstrated familiarity with them (as with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich or Simone Weil, for instance) or because the comparison or contrast is too good to miss, even if Murdoch herself largely did so (Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva).

When it comes to Murdoch's own theology, Fiddes adumbrates this very unsystematic territory in his first two chapters, where he neither speculates about origins, nor draws on the little we know of Murdoch's Anglican religious 'background'. He does briefly cover her personal involvement with the Christian work of Oxford Theologian Donald MacKinnon; suggests the appeal of J. A. T. Robinson, Don Cupitt and the 'Death of God' movement; and looks at her substitute of a Platonic 'Good' for any notion of a personal God (although with caution she does allow a 'mystic Christ'). He notes that Murdoch presents an approach to ethics as paying attention to other people precisely as they are, rather than as what one wants or needs them to be. She is wary of saviours of all kinds and suspects that most consolations, religious ones in particular, are false. To be for the Good means to be good for no reason or reward – 'good for nothing'. It is an extremely high calling.

Readers of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* will be especially interested in Fiddes' discussion of Murdoch's revision of Kant and her understanding of what art can offer toward the construction of a theology of the sublime (chapter 3). He brings Murdoch somewhat uneasily 'into conversation' with Julia Kristeva (chapter 4) and Jacques Derrida (chapter 5), and then more expectedly (and to my mind more richly) in dialogue with Simone Weil (both in chapter 6 and in a brief coda). It is in the last pages of the coda, in the company of Tillich as well as of Murdoch, that one delights to see Fiddes stretch his own constructive theological wings, although throughout the book he does from time to time lightly reveal his hand, giving us a sense of what he personally makes of all the 'Others' – novelists, theologians, philosophers and the like – to whom he has primarily turned.

Readers who are engaged primarily by Murdoch's fiction will be grateful for the way Fiddes reads her novels, not as illustrations of theological thought but as imagined embodiment of ideas about God and the Good that richly informed her creative work over the decades. I found his comparison of *The Time of the Angels* (1966) and *The Good Apprentice* (1985) very informative, but wished that his treatment of *The Bell* (1958) had been fuller, especially given the importance of the Prioress of Imber Abbey in that novel. (It must be said that Fides gives attention to *The Bell* in three substantial passages. Such is the nature of the Murdoch aficionado, however, that there is never enough attention paid to a favourite book.)

Although often to their detriment as well as that of others, so many of Murdoch's characters live out their ideas (theological as well as philosophical) in ways that bring abstract thought to life and often into crisis. Fiddes catches the theological drama of Murdoch's fiction at the same time that he analyses the intellectual substratum that undergirds it and gives it depth. He points to resources that the customary readers of the novels cannot recognise on their own, but which, once elucidated, become rich objects of comparison and illumination. If you want to see Murdoch 'do' theology, he seems to say, watch her at work and play in her fiction, even as 'the Others' she drew upon did so in their diverse kinds of writing.

In a work like this, where so much must be summarised in order to be brought into discussion, Fiddes is reliably able to go to the heart of the matter. This is no small feat of concision. On occasion, the achievement has unintended consequences. At times the sheer complexity of Murdoch's plots and *dramatis personae* – the multiple identities, the unlikely twists and turns – can, when encountered in summary, inspire a smile. The 'fat relentless ego' that drives so many of her characters into extreme and unlikely situations retains a kind of magic when the reader is under a novel's spell; apart from it in digest or paraphrase, however, Murdoch's version of bells and whistles, when reduced to bare plot essentials, can strain credulity and cause an eye to roll.

Fiddes' achievement in his book puts him a league with Elizabeth Dipple, *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* (1982), and Peter J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (1989, 2001). Both are interested in the spiritual dimension of her work but Fiddes in the relation of her fiction to the theologians of her day, whose thought she implicitly parallels or counters in her own inimitable way. He has made here an important contribution not only to Murdoch studies in particular but to the field of religion and literature more generally.