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Book reviews

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Peter van Inwagen (ed.) *Christian Faith and The Problem of Evil.* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004). Pp. xiv + 316. ISBN 0 8028 2697 0.

Christian Faith and The Problem of Evil is an eclectic volume of conference papers, mainly by participants in a summer seminar devoted to the argument from evil directed by Peter van Inwagen in 1999, with the addition of a few papers by distinguished scholars who participated in the conference, though not in the seminar, and a paper by Van Inwagen. As a collection which came together more by chance than by design, there is no guiding *telos*. All of the papers deal with Christian faith and the problem of evil, but some are philosophy and some are not. Some seem aimed at the trained philosopher, and some at other audiences. Some are, speaking from the perspective of a philosopher, weak and unhelpful, while some, including non-philosophical papers, present extremely interesting arguments and ideas which inspire further questions.

Among the less helpful papers is '"In the Bible, it can be so harsh!" Battered women, suffering, and the problem of evil' by Carol Winkelmann. The project sounds promising; an analysis of the religious content of the language used by women in a shelter for battered women as they discuss their lives, their views, and their hopes, with an emphasis on the problem of evil. Unfortunately, although the paper is almost forty pages long, we do not spend enough time with any of the women to begin to grasp what they believe. Winkelmann adopts a feminist methodology which imposes a theoretical, academic framework such that the snippets of the women's conversation become mere proof texts for this or that feminist point. Winkelmann herself writes with contempt of traditional religion, is pleased to discover the women in the shelter inventing 'local theologies', and seems entirely indifferent to whether or not there might be any truth of the matter regarding God and evil.

In 'Normal narcissism and the need for theodicy', another paper not likely to please most garden-variety Christian philosophers, Richard T. McClelland offers a psychoanalytic analysis of the motives of those doing theodicy. He does

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not offer a definition of 'normal' narcissism, but it turns out to be pretty unwholesome. That theodicies are doing 'narcissistic work' is evidenced by the fact that they are defensive, by which McClelland means that they try to show that opposing arguments fail, and they make this defensive case aggressively, as conveyed 'by the almost painful technical virtuosity of many of these arguments'. But McClelland does not make the case that this is more true of theodicies than of any other project in philosophy. Doing theodicy engenders 'moral blindness' and indicates a self-absorption such that the suffering of the victim is ignored. 'Theodicists may be unable to take in the full and unique reality of individual sufferings because they are utterly absorbed in *some other task*.' McClelland does not provide evidence, either from the texts of the theodicists or from their lives, to support this claim, and, given that some of the great works of theodicy were born of the suffering of their authors, it seems a hard case to make. Surely Boethius, as he sits in prison stripped of family, fortune, and position, awaiting a brutal execution, has a right to be heard when he claims to find consolation in philosophy.

This is not to say that all of the non-philosophical papers are unhelpful to the Christian philosopher. In 'Seeing God where the wild things are: an essay on the defeat of horrendous evil', John R. Schneider offers an interpretation of Job, which he carries over insightfully to the discussion of Christ's sovereignty over the demonic and the dangerous in the early part of Mark's gospel. And Barbara Omolade provides an interesting counterpoint to Winkelmann's paper with 'Faith confronts evil'. The paper discusses the deep Christian faith of some of the remarkable black women who suffered as slaves and yet rose up to preach against the terrible evil of slavery.

I am not competent to judge the historical merits of this paper, but what is striking is that Omolade does not treat these women as case studies to prove her own contemporary point, and she does not bracket their faith as an antiquated, anthropological oddity. Rather she is willing to listen when they insist that they could not have accomplished what they have, had it not been for the loving presence and guiding power of the living God. Omolade concludes with a fascinating suggestion which philosophers dealing with the problem of evil ought to pursue. She points out that 'Human free will is fundamental to God's plan for human beings and God protects the agency of both the sinner who commits evil acts and their victims who are encouraged to respond and resist those acts.' Critics of the free-will defence often claim that it would be wrong for God to permit the suffering of victims simply to guarantee the freedom of their abusers. Through her history of these remarkable women Omolade makes the point that if free will is valuable, it is valuable for the victims as well.

Some of the philosophical papers are more reports on the thought of others. For those, like myself, who know nothing about Simone Weil, 'God, evil, and the thought of Simone Weil' by Robert Stanley offers a provocative introduction to

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her colourful and non-traditional theodicy. 'The Gospel of redemptive suffering: Reflections on John Paul II's *Salvifici Doloris*' by Eduardo J. Echeverria is a bit too long, with many lengthy quotes, but the opportunity to read the work of the late Holy Father is always welcome.

Among the strictly philosophical papers, there are points made and questions raised which the philosopher engaged in theodicy will find genuinely valuable. Richard Otte in 'Probability and Draper's evidential argument from evil' makes the point that one's assessment of the probability of evil on the theist hypothesis is likely to depend upon whether one adopts 'mere' theism, or a more developed and robust theism such as Christianity. Christianity, after all, doctrinally entails that there is sin and suffering. Paul Draper responds in 'More pain and pleasure: a reply to Otte', and rather illustrates Otte's point than succeeds in refuting it. One does have the feeling of coming on the scene in the middle of things in that the key concept of 'epistemic probabilities', probabilities relative to one's epistemic situation, is invoked, but clearly requires much more development.

For example Draper posits that 'In general, the more specific and hence riskier an existential claim like theism is, the *less* probable that claim is intrinsically'. But it is at least prima facie puzzling how this principle is to be applied when the 'intrinsic' probability in question is relative to one's epistemic situation. The claim 'Kate Rogers exists' is very specific, and while it may be open to probability assessments by others, due to my epistemic situation, I find it certain. The Christian may claim that she is in a different epistemic position from the mere theist or the agnostic vis-à-vis the existence of God. Should the 'intrinsic' probability of theism be relativized to each epistemic situation? Del Kiernan-Lewis seconds Otte's basic view, arguing persuasively in 'The problem of evil: moral constraints and philosophical commitments' that those trying to make a case against generic theism do not succeed because they rely on metaphysical, epistemological, moral, and meta-ethical assumptions over which different species of theist disagree.

The papers on the probability of evil make the point that it is crucial to clarify the background assumptions upon which an argument rests. Keith D. Wyma's paper serves as something of an illustration of the point. 'Innocent sinfulness, guilty sin: original sin and divine justice' addresses the extremely difficult problem of how God can hold the agent born with original sin responsible for his sinful deeds. Wyma proposes a solution which depends upon allowing a clear distinction between the condition of sinfulness, the act of sin, and the punishment for sin which follows the act. The argument is couched with admirable analytic clarity, and may be persuasive to those who embrace the distinction. But suppose one is of a more Augustinian bent? Acts of sin are relatively unimportant compared to being in a state of sinfulness, which involves suffering disordered lusts, alienation from oneself and others, and, worst of all, separation from God. On Augustine's analysis – and this is the position of

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most medieval Christian philosophers and the Catholic Church today – it is being in the sinful condition that is the main punishment for sin. This is not to criticize Wyma's very thoughtful paper, but just to point out that Otte and Kiernan-Lewis make a case with general applicability. It is always well to be alert to the background assumptions from which an argument is drawn.

One of the most provocative suggestions regarding God's point in permitting evil comes from Laura Ekstrom in 'Suffering as religious experience'. It has been fairly common in the Christian tradition to hold that suffering may have value for the sufferer as a participation in the saving passion of Christ. Ekstrom carries this position one step further. God, as transcendent, suffers in His divine nature. It is appropriate that He suffer in that this is the loving response to all the suffering which His creatures undergo. But then our suffering may be valuable for us as a form of religious experience in the sense of having an experience which is like God's.

Ekstrom rightly points out that belief in a passible God is contrary to the tradition, and this is one important point for debate. Suppose, for example, that one held that it is not good for anyone to undergo needless suffering, but that human empathetic sorrow and grief is valuable in that it encourages us to behave properly towards others. Thus for us empathetic suffering is a catalyst to love. But God's love is perfect. It does not require a catalyst. Then is His empathetic suffering pointless, or is it perhaps a good in its own right? Secondly, if Ekstrom's suggestion – our suffering is of value as an experience like God's suffering – is intended as a real theodicy, a justification for God's permitting our suffering, then is there a problematic circularity at work? God's suffering is produced by our suffering, and God permits our suffering so that we can sharing in His suffering. Would it not just be better if nobody suffered? Exciting questions.

Perhaps the most intriguing argument of the book is made by Alvin Plantinga in 'Supralapsarianism, or ''O felix culpa'''. First Plantinga offers a careful discussion of a traditional position: The value of the Incarnation is so inestimably great that a world in which sin occurs and the need for atonement arises is a very, very good world. He responds to possible questions. Why suffering? Some is the result of free creatures choosing evil and causing suffering, and some suffering may be instrumentally valuable, perhaps as a means towards improving our character, and especially as a way of our sharing in the redeeming passion of Christ. Why so much sin and suffering? Plantinga writes, 'it seems to me that we have no way at all of estimating how much suffering the best worlds will contain'.

He does not address the questions which medieval philosophers saw as integral to the issue: granted that the Incarnation is such a great good, would it have occurred even if our first parents had not sinned? Answering this question occasioned a great deal of valuable work on the relationship of God to creation,

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especially concerning the second person of the Trinity, the Word, through whom all things are made. And if the Fall was a necessary cause of the Incarnation, then should we not see it as more than merely *felix* but also as a barely qualified *bonum*? Perhaps Plantinga's paper will spur contemporary discussion of the concept of *felix culpa* which will pursue these questions.

In most of the paper, Plantinga expresses, in a fresh and careful way, ideas which are familiar in the tradition, but at the end of the paper he introduces what, to my knowledge, is a genuinely new argument which should spawn a great deal of discussion. Is not the *felix culpa* thesis open to the charge that it implies that God suffers from 'a sort of Munchausen syndrome by proxy'? Would a good God really choose, among all the possible worlds, a world in which His children suffer so dreadfully, just so that He can display His own greatness as He steps in to rescue them? The problem is compounded by the fact that apparently at least some of the suffering which God has chosen for an individual creature will not ultimately benefit that particular creature at all. Is it right that God should make a world in which the great goods He intends are brought about in part or in some sense dependent upon my suffering? Would not this constitute God's simply *using* me? Well, it would not be wrong to inflict suffering on someone who freely consents to it. Suppose that God knows that, if I were able to make the decision regarding the creation of a world in which I suffer for a greater good, and if I understood the situation and possessed properly ordered affections, I would volunteer for the job of sufferer? Then permitting my suffering, even for someone else's benefit, is justified. Might this not be the actual situation?

This is a most provocative suggestion which raises all sorts of questions. The entire scenario is dependent on the idea that God has middle knowledge of what my free choice would be in the (emphatically!) non-actual situation in which He consults me regarding what world to make. I find the Molinist thesis of divine middle knowledge deeply mistaken for a number of reasons, but a discussion of that vexed issue would take us too far afield. But here is a different puzzle. The suffering which creatures undergo in our world is not only physical harm to themselves. The worst harm the created agent can undergo – this at least is the Augustinian take on things – is to be in a condition of sin. The *felix culpa* doctrine is aimed at providing a justification, or at least an explanation, for how a good God could allow such serious sin. The tradition has it that it is possible for us to set ourselves so adamantly against God that we are fit objects for eternal punishment.

Let us suppose now that I find myself suffering eternal damnation and I ask how a good God could have created, among all the possible worlds, one that would contain my suffering. Plantinga's suggestion is that perhaps God knows that, were I in a position to make the decision, assuming the proper qualifications, I would freely consent to my suffering in the interests of the great value of the world in which they occur. There must be significant identification

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between the 'I' who am actually suffering, and the 'I' who would consent, if the consent of the latter is to play a role in justifying God's 'use' of the suffering of the former in His overall plan. (That, at least, is how it seems to me, although I find Molinism so deeply puzzling that I am not confident of my ability to appreciate what entailments do and do not hold within the theory.) But then is it not the case that what justifies my eternal damnation is the fact that I, had I had the opportunity, would have freely consented to making the most heroic sacrifice imaginable? That cannot be right! Or can it? Clearly there is matter here for a great deal more discussion. *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, though eclectic and somewhat uneven, contains work that spurs the philosopher to new insights and new questions, and is thus a valuable contribution to the debate over God and evil.

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Paul Gavrilyuk *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Pp. xii+210. £54.50 (Hbk). ISBN 0199269823.

Paul Gavrilyuk (hereafter G.) is an assistant professor of historical theology at the University of St Thomas, St Paul. The present book is a modified version of his Ph.D. thesis; part of a chapter of it has been published elsewhere before. It is a well-written and tightly argued study, and it pursues a double agenda. One part of this is made explicit throughout, the other is implicit. The explicit stated agenda is to refute the notion, still widespread in modern ('Western') systematic theology, that the classic (Patristic) concept of divine impassibility, rather than being based on the biblical notion of God's transcendence, is in fact a distorting innovation influenced by 'Hellenistic philosophy', the result of a 'Hellenization process' that has alienated Christianity from its biblical roots. In chapters 1 and 2, G. forcefully and persuasively takes on this argument.

In chapter 1 (21–46) he makes 'the case against the theory of theology's fall into Hellenistic philosophy'. He points out that there is no single 'Hellenistic philosophy', but a plural diversity of philosophies, and that Epicureanism, the only school which held a concept perhaps similar to that which modern 'passibilists' reject, namely divine impassibility as a form of disinterested detachment from human affairs, was universally rejected in antiquity. Since the Stoics were the most vociferous critics of the Epicureans, it remains an open and even today much-debated question as to what they meant by *apatheia*,

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or by 'God' for that matter, whether they ever attributed the former to the latter, and how they perceived divine impassibility. Their concept of divine providence (*pronoia*) might provide an indication.

If there is one concept that unites all Hellenistic philosophers (except the outlawed Epicureans) then it is that 'God cares'; and in order for God to be able to care effectively, He must not be suffering from debilitating and distracting passions and emotions. This is why Hellenistic philosophers famously either polemicized against mythical and cultic 'theologies' with their anthropomorphic, morbid, and corrupt, deities, or they allegorized. The biblical God too is, generally speaking, 'not subject to mindless and capricious rage' (37). As G. elegantly demonstrates, comparing Hebrew and Septuagint parallel passages, the biblical concept of God that lies at the basis of both Judaism and Christianity is itself Hellenistic, though at this point G. himself becomes slightly confused in his use of the term 'Hellenism'. The 'Hellenistic influence on the development of pre-Christian Judaism' of which G. speaks (41) is not entirely 'external', as G. states, but largely identical with that development. The Septuagint, the Bible of Greek Christianity, is a Hellenistic achievement. At this crucial point (at the end of chapter 1) G.'s more implicit agenda comes to the fore.

Chapter 2 (47–63) is entitled 'The Christian God vs passionate pagan deities'. In it G. develops the concept of 'impassibility as an apophatic qualifier of divine emotions'. He now switches from a comparative 'history of ideas' to a 'systematic theology' mode. This has severe implications for his treatment of the Patristic material with which he works. 'Hellenistic' is not what G. would want to call either Judaism or Christianity, despite the overwhelming evidence presented in chapter 1. He reserves the term for the philosophies and religions of 'pagan' antiquity. Christianity, in his view so it seems, works with entirely new concepts, or should one say it operates in a completely new paradigm. But it is, of course, G. himself who, in his interpretation of the phenomenon, constructs the latter. Judaism, by the way, does not enter into G.'s equation. This naturally affects his discussion of first- and second-century Christianity, which as a consequence is rather sketchy.

G. presents the early Christian concept of 'divine impassibility' as 'an apophatic qualifier of divine emotions' (60). 'Apophatic' here seems to stand for the idea that anything said about God on the level of creation refers to God inadequately rather than adequately, but not because God is inadequate in relation to creation, but because creation is inadequate in relation to God. Within this framework, the purpose of the concept of divine impassibility is not to forestall 'any meaningful discourse about divine emotions' (62), but to put such a discourse in perspective. For G. to talk of divine emotions is precisely not to equate divine suffering with human suffering, as if the notion that God is equally miserable in His suffering as human beings are could be of any consolation to suffering human beings. Rather, divine suffering must be seen

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in the context of the economy of salvation. Faith in God, hope in victory, and love that overcomes suffering – such attitudes only make sense if it is the omnipotent, transcendent, impassible God who suffers, in such a way that suffering (like evil itself) has no chance of succeeding.

This approach is obviously systematic, as is G.'s account of 'the dialectics of Patristic thought' indicated in the subtitle. G. does not account for this approach. Rather he seems to assume that his readers should take it for granted. He does not account for the fact that, like Hellenistic thought, Patristic thought is extremely diverse and cannot be reduced to a hailstorm of -isms (Docetism, Patripassianism, Arianism, Nestorianism, and many others in between) each rejected and refuted in some detail until pure orthodoxy finds itself in the thought of Cyril of Alexandria (151–175). No doubt Cyril's theology is admirable for its elegance and coherence. In fact, G. might have done it more justice had he given it more space and studied it more in its own right, rather than as part of an a-historical, 'dialectic', history of the concept of divine impassibility in Patristic thought.

The problem is not that G. refutes the 'theory of theology's fall into Hellenistic philosophy' (172). He does so quite rightly, though it has been done before (e.g. by Charles Stead, of whose work in this area G. could have taken more notice). The problem is that G. does so with systematic preconceptions that generate an image of 'the gradual development of the doctrine of the incarnation in the Patristic period' of such 'remarkable logical elegance' (172) that it would have impressed Hegel. Once, when challenged that his philosophy bears little resemblance to historical reality, Hegel is supposed to have retorted, 'too bad for reality'. G.'s account too is a pleasure to read as long as one does not look too closely at historical and philological details.

This begins with bibliographical references. The reviewer apologises for being so nit-picking, but this seems symptomatic. Several modern authors are listed under the 'ancient authors' section (180–182), most prominently Luise Abramowski (between Pierre Abelard and Aeschylus). Translations and editions of ancient works are randomly thrown together. Some references are incomplete and consequently quite useless, others misleading in the sense that they refer to outdated editions or translations, or simply to volume numbers of Migne's *Patrologiae*. In the 'modern authors' section (183–196) the use of initials alternates with that of full first names, and many surnames are misspelled: Crouzel, De Labriolle, Jouassard, Heschel (176), Pierre Nautin (191). These are just minutiae picked up by browsing through the pages. What would someone find who went looking for it?

The problem is, of course, more profound. In its pursuit of a systematic point this study lacks concern for historical context or philological accuracy. From time to time G. does acknowledge that. Thus, after having used the term 'Docetism' for several pages and vaguely defined it in systematic terms,

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G. comes to admit: 'The origins of Docetic beliefs in Christianity are obscure' (80). He then vaguely hints at 'early Christian Gnostics', 'Graeco-Oriental speculation' and 'heterodox Jewish sectarian thought', but fails to admit who precisely held 'Docetic' views and above all, why (apart from the external and not quite convincing argument that Docetists may have tried to please or appease pagan sensibilites). In G.'s view such details depend 'upon the ingenuity of a given Docetic group' (80–81).

The 'Gnostics' are treated in a similar manner. They are defined from the perspective of anti-Gnostic writers (81 n.63), though they are treated sympathetically: They 'left us the most daring flights of speculative fancy' and 'tested the logical limits of the language of negative theology' (83). But their concept of divine impassibility (implicating Christ) was rejected by the Church Fathers (84), and that is what matters. G. also has doubts about 'Patripassianism'. Citing Harnack he asks 'whether the formula *Pater passus est* was ever deployed by any Patripassian' (93). He then cites as an example Noetus, as cited in Hippolytus' *Contra Noetum*, 2.3, who indeed seems to have used the phrase, but with the qualification that 'Christ is the Father'. Is this a 'straightforward affirmation of the point that the Father, who is truly God, was the subject of the sufferings of Christ' (93), or does it not rather raise the question, as G. himself admits only a page further on, of how Noetus thought of the relationship between Father and Son? Significantly, as again G. himself points out, Hippolytus 'nowhere explicitly attacks Noetus' claim that God suffered' (94).

The pattern is repeated in chapter 5 on 'Arianism'. G. deals with five interpretations of how and why it may have originated (105–114), but not with the questions of what it is and how it compares with Arius' own teaching (106), the Homoean position (109), or Eunomius' teaching (117–121), three quite different phenomena. G. reduces them roughly to the position that they were against the *homoousios* because for them it had a materialist (116) and Patripassianist (123–124) ring. Yet again, this was how their opponents defined them, e.g. Gregory of Nyssa in his *Contra Eunomium*. G. cites him at length to underline his point. But Gregory responds to a very specific position and he points out in his opening remark that his opponent does not deny 'the economy of the passion', but only argues that the impassibility of the Father does not admit the Father's involvement in the Son's passion (131). Prima facie quite a sensible anti-patripassian argument which, with some subtle distinctions, might even be sustained in an orthodox context.

Finally, on Nestorianism and Cyril of Alexandria, G. rightly rejects approaches which are overly focused on the alleged ambiguities of Cyril's character, or on deep-running differences between the theological traditions (often referred to as schools) of Alexandria and Antioch. 'Schools', G. thinks, is perhaps not the right word here, especially for Antioch (although John McGuckin has recently revived the term 'school' in a slightly different context, referring to all those

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thinkers who, in the wake of Origen and depending upon each other, formed what emerged as the Greek Orthodox theological tradition. This includes thinkers like the Cappadocians and Cyril of Alexandria, and excludes not just those linked to positions considered heretical by those included, but also those not directly or immediately relevant for the emergence of the tradition in question, like Irenaeus or Hippolytus. G. seems to edge towards a similar kind of approach, but he is not explicit, and perhaps also not entirely aware of it). At any rate, G.'s presentation of 'Nestorian' positions, be it Nestorius' own position or that of Theodore of Mopsuestia, suffers from the same lack of differentiation as those of earlier positions.

For G., as far as divine impassibility is concerned, Arianism and Nestorianism are quite similar (141–144): They carry impassibilism too far. Is it disingenuous to say that it almost seems as if, for G., they are not Patripassian enough, or that they are even anti-Patripassian, as is shown by the Oriental churches' charge against Cyril of defending *theopatheia* (144–151)? True, Cyril's own approach is genial and true; it cannot be reduced to the wrongheaded 'theory of theology's fall into Hellenistic philosophy' (149). But is Theodore's and Nestorius' position on balance any less genial, or, for that matter, any more reducible to the same wrongheaded theory, or any more right or wrong than Cyril's?

Both sides had carefully qualified opinions regarding divine impassibility. Both sides admitted to the suffering of the human nature. Both sides had found a way to describe the link, or unity, between divine and human nature. One preferred a more divine perspective, emphasizing unity and *kenosis*; the other a more human perspective, emphasizing distinction (but not separation) between divine and human nature, and the fact that ultimately anything that human beings can say of God, or do to meet their purpose as creatures, is subject to their being part of God's creation. The apophatic principle can be applied to both sides. It may well be that 'it was God's *kenosis* that secured humanity's *theosis*' (171), but it is only in the process of the latter that the former can be stated. While Cyril stressed the former, the Antiochenes emphasized the latter.

Whatever this has to say about the difficulty of modern theologians with divine impassibility remains to be asked. One might even conclude that it was Cyril's thought and its success and persuasiveness that made such a development possible at all. Are theologians like Moltmann, Jüngel, Bauckham, Temple, Soelle, Lee, and many others perhaps too Cyrillian in their outlook? In that case, might not a good measure of Nestorian (or Arian) awe help them to understand a little bit better the importance of divine impassibility within any coherent and convincing Christian soteriology? To them, as well as to all who enjoy engaging with a well-written and tightly argued, albeit at times a bit lopsided, theological argument, G.'s book is warmly recommended, though its constant use of stereotype in its presentation of historical developments and,

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in connection with this, the lack of care in handling philological and historical material (including passages in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew), generally classical, biblical, and Patristic references, and even references to secondary literature, also deserves criticism.

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