

Communion with the Incommunicable: The Paradox of Faith (Book Review)

Lossky, Vladimir. Orthodox Theology. An Introduction. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 10707, 1989. Translated by Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson. (ISBN 0913936435)

This book is a tribute and celebration of the ideas and life of a modern visionary, Vladimir Lossky, who was born in St Petersburg in 1903 into a studious and learned environment. Lossky had his life dislocated by the Revolution of 1917 and eventually ended up an emigre in Paris with a large number of his fellow Russians. In that context, it would not be surprising if his life experiences had embittered him, but to the contrary, he emerged as a warm, sincere and loving man of Christ. His work thus reflects an inclusory love of mankind with a mission to share with the world his profound love for God. Lossky does this by taking his readers into a dialogue so they can see what he sees of the beauty and wonderful dispensation of the loving master to his creation.

Lossky was a man of letters. He clearly loved words and the ideas they could capture if appropriately juxtaposed and inflected. He created tone, feeling and texture in his work as well as imparting information. This unfortunately takes time, and at the time of his death in 1958 he had published only one major work namely "The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church" in Paris in 1944. That work was seminal in that it explored the contemplation of God as understood by the Fathers as well as challenging the Western Christian understanding of the relationship of God and Man. So, it should be to that work one should look to determine whether the translators Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson have captured the spirit of the theology of this great man.

In his 1944 opus, Lossky makes it clear that there can be no theology without mysticism and the ultimate end of theology is theosis. Further, he saw the East and

West as being two local traditions witnessing the Christian truth until the schism, and although he acknowledges difference between the two, he saw the Church as one with obligation to communicate and understand each other. Thus, Lossky is ecumenical and believed in closer union of the members of the Church.

This focus allows Ian Kesarcodi-Watson in the foreword of *Orthodox theology* to declare "Mystical Theology" as "one of the finest expressions of authentic spirituality ever written" (P7) and to see parallels between his specialist area, Indian spirituality, and Christian Orthodoxy. The translator thus is clearly sympathetic as he is convinced that "in their truest mysticism" much of what is central to the traditions of Orthodoxy and Hinduism is largely shared.

At this point, something should be said of the translators and the way the book came into being. This book was the product of a discussion between the translator and Leonide Ouspensky in the mid-sixties held at the house of St Sergius and St Albans in London, a centre espousing closer relations between Orthodoxy and Anglicanism. Ouspensky, an author and artist, published "The Meaning of Icons" in 1956 which included Lossky's essay "Tradition and Traditions". Both he and the translator clearly admired the man and his works. Later, Ouspensky gifted to Ian Kesarcodi-Watson a number of articles by Lossky which Ian then vowed to translate. This he achieved with his wife Ihita and the work published was in 1978. The translator thus comes from the position that Lossky was a great theologian who had a universal message speaking to the human condition which goes beyond "the destructive abuses Christianity of the more parochial kind has perpetrated in its own name (P10).

The translator, with Lossky, shares enthusiasm for espousing the one spirit and the one truth to all mankind. Of course, this partisan position does have some pitfalls in

that there is scope for the translator's bias to emerge in his choices of groups of words to express an idea, thus perhaps taking the position slightly further than Lossky may have preferred, given, as the translator acknowledges, Lossky saw Christianity as superior in some way.

There are also a number of background premises that impact upon this book. Lossky was clearly influenced by the writings attributed to St Dionysius whose importance, according to Lossky, cannot be exaggerated to the whole history of the Church. Dionysius' work espoused the view that God can be known by negation of the highest names moving towards God in learned ignorance and ultimately in silence. Accordingly, man can have a personal and ontological encounter with the living God as God loves all his creation, if we are prepared to respond to his initiative and calling.

A further dynamic relates to the limits of language. When attempting to speak of the divine ideas, human language is an imprecise tool. What one experiences or senses cannot be properly conveyed in prose. Thus, in speaking of the Trinity, Lossky states "only poetry can evoke it precisely because poetry celebrates and does not pretend to explain" (P46). This is true of all attempts of expressing God which lead to the paradox of communication of the incommunicable. Words are inadequate to the unbeliever for as Lossky states "outside of Faith, theology has no sense" (P17).

The question now arising is how can we know God? The Father is known only through the Son and through the incarnation we are able to touch upon the mystery of God. Lossky explores this central and connective theme in his book. Chapter one explores the two monotheisms, that of the God of negation of the Old Testament and God as confession through the incarnation which leads to the Trinity. Thus, Jesus Christ leads to God and the Holy Spirit. From Trinitarian Theology, Lossky leads to Creation

Theology before returning to the person of Jesus in chapter four which deals with Christological dogma, before focusing in the post script on the discussion of image and likeness. Lossky thus presents an understanding, in faith, of the divine gifts and ideas.

Given the way the book came into existence several shortcomings appear. For instance, in the "two monotheisms", Lossky speaks of the God of the Jews as an authoritarian who is terrifying to his creation. On the other hand, God, through Christ who united humanity and divinity, is viewed as immanent and loving. What is overlooked is that it is the same God and it would have been better if an exploration was undertaken showing why the God of the Jews is the same as the God of the Christians albeit not received or understood by Jews as being so.

Another problem arises with the nature of "person". Lossky focuses on man "in the image of God is a personal being confronting a personal God" (P128). He then asserts that "Man was made perfect" (P130) and "evil entered into the world through the will of man" (P132). The difficulty that this implies is that the perfection of man allows him to choose ill to his fellow man. This election could not be countenanced if man was perfect, as perfection does not admit imperfection. In looking at the Greek word "prosopon" Lossky claims that it "is the mask or the role of an actor" and equates it to the Latin "persona" (P40). This idea is at odds with the Fathers who saw the person as a relational ecstatic entity drawing life and meaning from love with others and seeing in all human beings as a unique image of God. This is in contrast to the individual who sees self as the centre of his existence and fails to see God in other people.

This now brings the question of evil into play. The quiddity of evil is, according to Lossky, a revolt against God and that "the exact vision of evil is (thus) not essentialist but personalist" (P80) and that man has given a place to evil in his will but has refused his responsibility through Adam and "since then man has been in possession of evil" (P82). The difficulty in this juridical view is that God punishes all for a sin committed by a stranger. That sin is inherited is neither logical or consistent with a loving God who so loved that he offered his son as a perfect sacrifice for the redemption of mankind. This dilemma is one that is not addressed by Lossky. The ontology of sin lies, in reality, in the freedom of the created to reject the community of love offered by God to each of us individually.

Repentance is the individuals ontological state of return whereby the self-centeredness of his life is replaced by the unique godliness in his life and hence to salvation. Thus, man no longer lives in Christ, but Christ lives in man and so he becomes a person.

Lossky asserts that Man cannot be saved unless he is the helpless prey of evil (P84) and that man's salvation can only lie in participating in the theandric fullness of the Church. What is not made clear is how non-Christians are to be saved given they cannot enter this communion. Further, given that the boundary between good and evil is ephemeral and fluid, does ignoring the evil or condoning, depersonalizing, or rationalizing the evil makes the person "in the Church" guilty to any degree with the perpetrator? On this Lossky is silent.

Further, how does the Church answer the "why me?" of the victim. What comfort can theologians give to the here and now of evil? It is not enough to engage in the Theodicy of yesterday, Leibniz is dead. As the problem of evil demonstrates intellectualization

of God it affords cold comfort to the abused, the oppressed and the dispossessed. To this point Lossky also fails to make the word of God relevant thus implying a dichotomy between God's people based on membership of the Church.

Despite shortcomings the book is a celebration of an unusual intellect who sings the Word of God. It clearly has a lot to offer through an engaging style. It has a dense theology that requires mental alertness which repays the reader in proffering a myriad of word pictures which demonstrate Lossky's love for his subject. Lossky further demonstrates care in trying to come to an understanding of God on the Ecumenical stage. This he does in the context of being an uncompromising witness for Orthodoxy who sees man's destiny as communion with God through Jesus Christ yet open to the view of "the other".

Unfortunately, the book has no index or bibliography which makes navigation quite difficult. However, this small criticism aside, I commend this book for the serious student who wishes to explore his relationship with God in a mature and profound way as well as for the pastoral care professional who may require to refocus on the meaning of moving towards God.

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