

BOOK REVIEWS

Joan O'Hagan, *Jerome & His Women* (Sydney, Black Quill Press, 2015); pp. x + 272; ISBN 978-0-646-94370-1.

Perusing the catalogue of recent historical fiction set in the ancient world, there are few titles that address early Christian history. Novels on ancient Greece and Rome abound, indeed the author of the volume under review published on the latter (*A Roman Death*, 1988), but hardly does one find a fictional tale taking place towards the end of late antiquity, a period fraught by social, political, and theological turmoil. In her final novel, the late Joan O'Hagan dared to explore this turbulent yet fascinating period, where Rome—the 'centre of the world'—was on the brink of collapse; where the old gods of paganism—though still a vivid presence—were marginalised with the spread of Christianity (the official religion of the Roman Empire in A.D. 381); and where a group of aristocratic women in the old capital city—Christian and devout—would come under the sway of an enigmatic and volatile figure, the priest-theologian (and later saint) Jerome the Dalmatian, who, between the years 382 and 385, was commissioned by Pope Damasus I, arguably the most powerful person in Western Europe at the time, to translate the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, into Latin (the so-called Vulgate).

Normally, I would not give away as many details as I am about to in a novel review. But since the author has based the tale on historical facts (with fictional embellishments to make the story come to life), then I would like to give the following breakdown of the book. It is divided into four parts: 'Commission,' which—as the title suggests—outlines Pope Damasus' commissioning of Jerome to undertake this important translation of the scriptures into Latin (which the author argues helped consolidate Christendom in the Latin West); 'Intrigue in High Places,' which follows the subterfuge enacted by various characters to suit their own interests, from aristocratic pagans trying to maintain the status quo or sneaky 'Christians' of lower rank—such as the fictional Aetius—who manipulates Jerome, the women he is surrounded by, and various figures in the papal court in order to seek his own advancement; 'Expulsion from Rome' delineates the events that lead up to Jerome's exile from the city, and 'Afterwards,' which foreshadows the journey of Jerome and Paula to the

Book Reviews

Holy Land (this is followed by a brief historiographical postscript outlining the achievements of Paula and Jerome after they had settled there).

Returning to the main characters of the novel, Damasus, who appears at the beginning of the first chapter, is portrayed as an elderly yet strong willed Pontiff concerned for the health of his Church, for orthodoxy, and especially for the Church's virgins, who in "turning their backs on marriage, on childbirth, on the demands of the great families" (p. 4) to serve God, constitute exemplars of Christianity. This statement, in a nutshell, contains some of the significant themes explored in later chapters. The novel quickly introduces us to a married Christian mother of five, Paula, who becomes a celibate widow after the death of her husband, Toxotius, a powerful pagan aristocrat whose family is a constant, stifling presence for a woman who dreams of escaping to the desert to live the life of a Christian hermit. After Toxotius' death, Paula ensconces herself in a circle of ascetic Christian women of high birth and rank led by the erudite Marcella. These women, in their dedication to asceticism—to prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and the study of the scriptures—break all the Roman conventions regarding familial obligations, dress, and social mores in order to live according to a higher ideal; to participate in the life of heaven. Of course, the tensions between Paula and her children, particularly Blesilla, whose youthful trysts with a man whom she could not marry (the fictional character, Bassus), later haunts her marriage to the poet Furius and her subsequent widowhood, is a main theme in the novel. This is especially the case in relation to the tension between Blesilla's past love affair and her gradual embracement of the Christian faith; a tension that results in her tragic death.

Enter into this picture Jerome, the haughty ascetic whose intellectual prowess is matched only by his trenchant vitriol against, well, just about anybody. Jerome is quickly embraced by the group of women in Marcella's circle, and by Paula in particular, who becomes his spiritual solace during his most dire moments. Jerome, in fact, becomes an informal teacher of these women, regularly giving them lectures on spiritual topics, especially on the physical virginity that they are exhorted to maintain. Indeed, Joan O'Hagan shows incredible adeptness in translating some of Jerome's theological sentiments—particularly his praise of virginity as a superior way of life to marriage—into narrative (especially reflected in his Letter 22: *To Eustochium*). It is a truism that Jerome has been considered severe in his approach towards marriage—even by his contemporaries—

and O'Hagan has Blesilla, whom Jerome enthusiastically exhorts towards the virgin life, as suggesting the legitimacy of marriage for Christians. Of course, Blesilla is spot on: marriage is a sacrament of the Church and many Christian writers, from St John Chrysostom to St Maximus the Confessor, praise marriage as blessed by God—but all of this is lost on Jerome, who throughout the novel is constantly railing against it as inferior to a life free from external attachments that can distract from the life of study, fasting and prayer (one again, the classic text is Letter 22: *To Eustochium*). The danger in Jerome's approach is of course obvious, and O'Hagan conflates his influence on Blesilla with the fictional account of her own passionate attachment to the memories of a past lover; in the novel the resulting asceticism that Blesilla undertakes to be absolved of her sinful past, under the direction of Jerome, results in her death. That the poor woman did perish under Jerome's strict guidance, and that he received opprobrium from the Roman community for her death, is a well known historical fact: but that Blesilla died as a result of not being able to reconcile her 'lust' with her newfound Christian beliefs is an invention of the author which fleshes out the historical occurrence of her death and contributes to the narrative's culmination, when Jerome is finally driven from Rome (for reasons that I will not disclose here, but which are excellently covered in the novel).

I would shudder for any reader to think that Jerome's militant approach as described in the novel is characteristic of the early Christian tradition; but O'Hagan is merely describing the man as he was, and his extant writings, and historical portrait, demonstrate this. In fact, before reading this novel, my familiarity with the Dalmatian was limited to his criticism of the great Alexandrian theologian Origen, which was motivated by his filial relationship with St Epiphanius of Salamis, who in turn was convinced by Theophilus of Alexandria—another mentor to Jerome—to condemn Origen. Jerome was therefore motivated in his crusade against Origen by his indebtedness to Epiphanius—who, as mentioned, criticised Origen at the behest of Theophilus—and his complicated relationship with the blessed Rufinus of Aquileia, whose translation of Origen's *On Principles* included a preface that mentioned Jerome's enthusiasm for the Alexandrian—an enthusiasm that Jerome was quick to repudiate in order to avoid the charge of heresy. Thus, the first main condemnation of Origen in ecclesiastical milieus, over a century after his death, was undertaken so that Theophilus and Jerome could preserve their reputations, a condemnation that was not without its collateral damage (Rufinus and St John

Book Reviews

Chrysostom, the great bishop of Constantinople, also suffered as a result). The irony, of course, is that both Theophilus and Jerome began as admirers of Origen, and O'Hagan perfectly captures Jerome's early love of Origen as well as the seeds of doubt concerning his orthodoxy (placed in the mouth of Marcella) that Jerome would later take up.

Despite all of this, O'Hagan remarkably manages to elicit sympathy for Jerome from the reader. Her rendition of the Dalmatian's character includes all the arrogance and polemicism that is also part of his historical portrait: but the author also illustrates the all-too-human deficiencies of an ambitious, tempestuous character whose literary accomplishments, worthy of much acclaim and exemplified by the Vulgate, became indispensable to the formation of Western Christianity. In short, and without giving much else away, *Jerome & His Women* is a meticulously researched and well informed novel that re-creates—in vivid detail—a crucial period in the history of Western Christianity, and the men and women who shaped it. In doing so, it offers incredible insight into the achievements of a much maligned yet very important figure, namely St Jerome, and the women surrounding him who—in taking a stand against the luxurious and often debased social conventions of late antique Rome—were trailblazers in their own right.

Mario Baghos
St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College

Andrei A. Orlov, *Divine Scapegoats: Demonic Mimesis in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 2015); pp. xvi + 336; ISBN 978-1-4384-5583-9.

Nearly half of this book is taken up by notes, and that might be a good thing because the notes contain more than page references in books and articles cited, but also additional sources to check, explanatory expansions on the main text, and significant parallel information. Without maps, photographs or other illustrations, however, the focus is on textual materials, about patterns of ideas, affinities between symbols and collections of speculations about other dimensions of the world than what is perceived, felt and recorded. That is, as apocalyptic fantasies,

soteriological paradigms, and linguistic habits; yet that they may be descriptions of monumental pictures, manuscript illuminations, remembered ruins of statues and frescoes, none of that is mentioned. That at specific historical times there were rituals, iconography and social problems to be worked out in symbolic terms; that later there were dreams shared, discussed and commented upon—none of this obtains in Orlov's book.

In a sense, it seems, the book is not half discussion and half footnote: it is one half footnote and the other half lists of sources. The footnote section is dense and filled with important bibliographical information, background studies of interesting issues raised but not explored in the first part, and evaluations of current scholarship. In terms of style, the second half is clear and almost without jargon. The first section, divided into two sections—part I “Studies in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*” has five chapters, mostly concerned with Azazel, the Messianic Scapegoat; and Part II, “Studies in *2 Enoch*” has three chapters and deals with cosmological, sacerdotal and iconographic themes—is, however, written in a rather peculiar style, virtually a different mode of argumentation altogether. There is also a brief and unsatisfactory Conclusion which fails to do more than summarize the superficial points made in the previous eight chapters.

Except in one paragraph (on p. 94), the author does not attempt to create a cultural, ideological or aesthetic context for the documents he reads closely and compares with one another, and seems to assume that somewhere there is a single source for the characters, narrative events, mythological and magical imagery, and what he calls “conceptual paradigms” dealt with in these books and pamphlets (as he calls them) from Jewish, Christian, Gnostic and ambiguous or unclassifiable traditions. The authors, anonymous and pseudonymous, individual or collective, somehow have read and then commented on one another's works, leaping across time and space for unknown reasons, fissuring, reassembling and creating variations on the original myths, legends, allegories and fantastic conceits they deal with.

More strongly in the second section of Notes, Orlov's *Divine Scapegoats* suggests that these magical, irrational and nightmare visions may be part of a cultural need to cope with the various crises of the opening centuries of the Common Era: the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the repression of the defeated, scattered and fragmented Judaism by the

Book Reviews

Roman Empire, the contentious rise of a Christianity in opposition to Judaism, the persecution of this Primitive Church. Without this human and historical context to his argument, Orlov's discussions seem to show the particles of imagery, plot and cultic actions interacting without human agency or social pressure. What he brings to the surface, through his intimate knowledge of the documentary sources and the latest scholarship, is most interesting, but insubstantial.

Moreover, as we remarked, his prose is peculiar, to say the least: (a) words are vague and mislead, as when he uses *tradition*, *lore* and *conceptual core* as virtual synonyms; (b) yet sometimes his locutions are quite poetic, as in "the aural praxis of praise" or "independent attestation to a traditional typology"; (c) while other terms are unnecessarily thick and tendentious, as when he repeatedly refers to Adam and Eve as *protoplasts* or uses *portentous* in its root sense of having to do with portents and omens, without consideration of the normal modern sense of pompous, overblown and self-important.

In other words, this could have been a study in the history of art, iconology, or hallucinations and other forms of mental illness. But it is not. *Divine Scapegoat* is at best, a deep, intense examination of a fairly limited phenomenon in the history of the Jewish imagination and spiritual speculations, one that collects essays together as part of an ongoing series of studies in an important but esoteric field. Instead, Orlov's book is a quaint source for those who wish to engage in close- and contextual-readings of what amounts to a series of inscribed public dreaming by mystics in the period between the ancient and the antique world of the eastern Mediterranean permits us now to gain some insight into the imagination of those who in retrospect can be seen as marginal players in the formation of rabbinical Judaism and Primitive Christianity. Most of the work remains for us to do.

Norman Simms
University of Waikato

Harry Bucknall, *Like A Tramp, Like A Pilgrim: On Foot, Across Europe to Rome* (London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2014); pp. xiv + 245; ISBN 978-1-4081-8724-1.

This attractive and entertaining memoir is the account of a journey on foot from Canterbury to Rome, along the ancient pilgrim trail known as the Via Francigena. Bucknall notes that the earliest known English pilgrim to make this journey was Wilfrid of Hexham in the seventh century; he set out from St Paul's Cathedral in London on 7 May, and walked to Canterbury via the trail that Geoffrey Chaucer's pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* made famous. He then made his way to Dover, and crossed to Calais where the journey began in earnest. Bucknall is not writing an academic tome, and his account is filled with anecdotes about historical and literary figures, sojourns in picturesque French convents in which a witty nun, Soeur Lucie, teases him about his gargantuan appetite (stimulated by hiking), and the often-tricky negotiations necessary to get his pilgrim passport stamped. *Like A Tramp, Like A Pilgrim* is a genial travelogue, but has some qualities that make it worthwhile for students of pilgrimage and religion, church history and buildings as heritage, and of the value of slowing down in an increasingly rapid and exhausting world.

Military commemoration is also a thread throughout Bucknall's narrative; he visits the grave of Gregor Hammerling, a German soldier buried in Neuville-St Vaast Cemetery, because Hammerling died on 3 May 1917, the same date that his twenty-year-old Great Uncle Walter, a Captain in the Northumberland Fusiliers, was killed (though Walter has no grave, but is just a name on the war memorial at Arras). Later in the book, Bucknall ruminates on the Napoleonic Wars while staying at the Chateau de Brienne, where Napoleon won a notable victory against the Allied Armies, commanded by Field Marshals von Blücher and Prince Karl Philipp zu Schwarzenberg in January 1814' (p. 71). His own military past moves to centre-stage when he meets old companions, "Jason Cooke and Gary Burns, who had both served as Guardsmen in my platoon when we were stationed in Hong Kong in the 1908s" (p. 82), and, more poignantly, when Bucknall is joined for part of the journey in Italy by another old comrade, Jock Davis, for whom "life was none too good at home" (p. 155). When they part at Piacenza, Jock gives Bucknall "a large eight-pointed Star

Book Reviews

of the Garter in silver with blue and red enameled detailing, the regimental insignia of the Coldstream Guards” (p. 165).

Along with military reminiscences, Bucknall also reflects on his relationship to the Christian tradition during the walk, and reveals certain beliefs and affections (for example, his belief that St Spyridon of Corfu is his special patron, reflections on angels, attendance at Anglican and Catholic services along the route, and so on). The continued popularity of pilgrimage trails, even those that – like the Via Francigena and the Camindo de Santiago – require the walker to make significant effort and take long periods out from his or her ‘everyday’ life is an interesting phenomenon in the modern West, in which church attendance is declining and fewer nominate Christianity in answer to the religion question in censuses. The encounter with the beauties of nature, and the impressive historical abbeys and churches that are dotted throughout the landscape, and an awareness of a rich Christian heritage that has aesthetic and nostalgic value is part of Bucknall’s book, although it is not clear what impact these thoughts and perceptions might have on his religious or spiritual identity. *Like A Tramp, Like A Pilgrim* is an easy read, yet raises important questions about the place of religion, work, leisure, and finding the time to walk more than fourteen hundred miles from Canterbury to Rome in an increasingly secular, materialistic and time-poor culture. I recommend it to readers interested in pilgrimage, the European religious heritage and travel writing.

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney

Octavian Saiu (ed.), *European and Universal Dimensions of the Theatre of the Absurd* (Bucharest, Editura Paideia, 2011); pp. 190; ISBN 978-973-596-729-1.

This short volume is a collection of three English-language and three Romanian-language essays published on the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Esslin’s ground-breaking *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). Octavian Saiu’s brief preface ‘After Half A Century: The Theatre of the Absurd’, provided in English and Romanian, notes that both Samuel Beckett and

Eugen Ionesco rejected the classification of their works, and that no school of movement with a manifesto (as with Dada and Surrealism) existed. Two chapters by Carmen Stanciu and Ion M. Tonus discuss plays by Ionesco (respectively, *Exit The King*, and *The Chairs* and *Killer Without Reward*), and Saiu's own contribution analyses both Ionesco and Beckett. The remaining three contributions are Chris Ackerley on Beckett, and Manabu Noda and Yun-Cheol Kim on recent theatrical productions influenced by theatre of the absurd in Japan and Korea.

Ackerley's 'I Thought It Was Deep': Aesthetics of the Shabby in Chekhov and Beckett' argues that the two writers shared a "deep pessimism," wrote plays that are structurally simple yet profound, and are committed to directing attention to "absurdities of... everyday life" governed by shabbiness and lack of heroism (p. 18). That both have been interpreted by directors in political terms (Chekhov as a critic of the old order during the Soviet era, and Beckett's Pozzo as a landlord exploiting the proletariat, Lucky) is viewed by Ackerley as of interest, but not fundamental in the way that simply seeing their art as being about living and acting despite the fact that life, suffering and death are ultimately without meaning is. His discussion of Chekhov's illness, death and funeral is amusing while being both mundane and sad. Ackerley's thoughts about the ways that Beckett sought to control the aesthetic of productions of his plays to the extent that directors were prevented from radical makeovers, and the opposite that applies to Chekhov's *oeuvre*, where directors have attempted "to make it seem 'relevant' rather than let it speak for itself by silences and pauses" (p. 32) are insightful and make his conclusion that there was a profound awareness of what it means to be human in both very clear and supported by argument.

Yun-Cheol Kim's 'The Legacy of the Absurdist Theatre in Korea' discusses Park Jo-Yeol's *The Dialogue of the Two Long-Necked Men* (1966), Lee Hyun-Hwa's *A Live Cleansing Ritual* (1981), and Park Kyun Hyoung's *Don't Be Too Surprised* (2009), noting the first play's affinity with *Waiting For Godot*, and the second and third's affinities with the works of Harold Pinter, in particular *The Homecoming* (1965) and *The Birthday Party* (1958). The second half of the chapter considers productions of works by Beckett and Ionesco staged in Korea, beginning with a 1960 staging of *The Lesson*. It is concluded that theatre of the absurd is a minor stream in Korean drama productions, which remain broadly realist.

Book Reviews

Manabu Noda's 'As a Manner of Speaking: Agentless Absurdity in Modern Japanese Theatre' analyses the importance of Kunio Kishida (1890-1954) in the emergence of absurdist theatre in Japan. Noda identifies theatre of the absurd as postmodern, with Beckett's characters recalling "fragmented and distorted" bits of Western literary heritage, and Pinter's none (p. 64). Kishida's characters speak in unfinished sentences, each preoccupied and not really hearing the other, with ruptured language and passive acceptance. A later author, Minoru Betsuyaku (b. 1937) relates this dramatic idiom to Japan's post-war malaise, the "complacency, ignorance, oblivion and apathy... which resulted in the constant erosion of their effective political agency" (p. 76).

While a complete understanding of the aims and achievement of this volume is impossible for readers who are not bilingual in English and Romanian, it is still an interesting achievement. The anniversary of Esslin's coining of 'theatre of the absurd' is a worthy event to celebrate, and connecting the contemporary drama of Korea and Japan to post-war European themes and developments leads to important insights. This interesting volume repays the reader's attention.

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney

Octavian Saiu, *Hamlet and the Madness of the World* (Bucharest, Institutul Cultural Roman, 2016); pp. 235; ISBN 978-973-577-676-3.

This intriguing short book is a comparative study of three twenty-first century productions of *Hamlet* that interpret both the play and the character in radically different terms to the dominant reception(s) that have been advanced since the Elizabethan era. Chapter 1, 'The Play and the Protagonist: A Selective History', sketches these representations, stressing the heroic dimension of Hamlet that has been retained throughout the centuries. Hamlet's youth, intellectual quality, solitude, and feigned madness recur as motifs among commentators on the play, including Friedrich Nietzsche, T. S. Eliot, Harold Bloom, and James Joyce. Saiu notes two influential trends in twentieth-century productions; Western culture's Freudian psychological reading of the play, and Eastern Europe's

portrayal of the Prince of Denmark as a dissident in a repressive, even totalitarian, society. The latter view renders the “madness” of Hamlet both strategic and inevitable; he seeks to elude the surveillance of the “ruthless regime” (p. 40) and to think freely thus involves a kind of insanity.

The second chapter, ‘The Wooster Group: Hamlet as ‘Descending Into a Kind of Madness’’, opens with the 1964 Broadway production of Hamlet, starring Richard Burton and directed by John Gielgud, with a minimal set and a screaming, furious Hamlet. A film of the production was the starting point for Elizabeth LeCompte’s *Hamlet*, in which “the stage is divided between a multiform recording presented on strategically positioned screens and the live actors, who deliver a precise rendition of the original” (p. 74). When the film flickers or halts momentarily, the Wooster Group actors do the same. This *Hamlet* is devoid of heroism and without a message. Saiu describes it as postmodern, hyper-real, a satire on the idea that unique live performances can be preserved or re-created by film, and achieving “the dismantling of the psychological unity of the character by means of deconstructing the textual unity of the play” (p. 87). The relationship of this production to contemporary humanity’s imbrication with technology is also probed.

Chapter 3, ‘The Schaubuhne: Thomas Ostermeier or ‘I Am Hamlet’’, considers Ostermeier’s 2008 production in Berlin. Saiu describes Ostermeier as a director with a “violent” vision, and his Hamlet as “incendiary” (pp. 102, 104). The issue of madness is central, as is the savagery and cruelty of modern humanity. The theatrical ancestry of the production includes Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, the plays of the late Sarah Kane, and parodies and ‘other’ versions of Hamlet, such as Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*. What distinguishes Ostermeier’s play is that “logic has been eliminated entirely, while the political is translated through the defective mechanism of instincts” (p. 128). Hamlet is mad, driven by an insane desire for revenge, and he is guilty of crimes, he is the agent of the deaths of so many of the play’s characters, not merely an observer.

The fourth chapter, ‘The Young Vic: Hamlet, Between Surveillance and Escape’, covers Ian Rickson’s 2011 version, which was the first time that this director had tackled Shakespeare. The set (and area where the audience sits) is a psychiatric facility, and Michael Sheen’s Hamlet is a scruffy mental patient being treated by Dr Claudius. Saiu links this production to the theoretical repertoire of Michel Foucault, the hospital

Book Reviews

to a prison, and characterises Hamlet as an anti-victim (as he really is mad). A parallel is drawn between Hamlet, murderous in his desire to escape, and Alex in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, "a character who, despite the treatment he receives, remains entirely unchanged in his evilness" (p. 170).

The final chapter, 'Theatre and the Madness of the World', argues that madness is everywhere in the contemporary world. Lack of certainty about the causes of psychopathy (simply mad or also bad?), loss of faith in religion, and the lack of connection to reality exhibited by politicians, oligarchs, and others in power, all make contemporary people anxious and uncertain. Saiu draws attention to the post-9/11 atmosphere of fear brought about by global terrorism, and revisits his opening characterisation of Hamlet as "young, alone, and lucid," suggesting that the three productions discussed present a Hamlet "unatoned for through love... [with] the carnage he leaves in his wake... his sole legacy" (pp. 210, 214-215). *Hamlet and the Madness of the World* is a thought-provoking work that is very rewarding to read. It is recommended to theatre studies scholars and students, and to all with an interest in Shakespeare, and deserves a wide readership.

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney

Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Ropley, UK, Zero Books, 2010); pp. 212; ISBN 978-1-84694-394-2.

Speculative realism is a small and largely blog-based philosophical movement opposed to post-Kantian anthropocentrism and idealism. These realists object to the notion that humans and their thoughts should be privileged. The world does exist, and it exists even when we are not thinking about it. Graham Harman – one of the movement's key members – has developed his own variation, object-oriented ontology, which, influenced by Heidegger's thoughts on 'tools', asserts that the world is only comprised of objects; "that which has unified and autonomous life apart from its relations, accidents, qualities, and moments" (p. 199). Everything is an object, including people, animals, car keys, and electromagnetic

radiation. Even his relation with a tree is an object (p. 205). In *Towards Speculative Realism*, Harman charts the development of his ideas, and of his career. The former sportswriter who became a continental philosopher at one of Africa's top universities (American University in Cairo) compiles eleven of his essays and lectures, from 1997-2009. My noting of Harman's – and his theory's – origins is not meant superciliously. Rather, good philosophy and good scholarship can come from unexpected places (as I am all too aware with my own 'fringe' work on questioning Jesus' historical existence; several New Testament scholars are now acknowledging that such work is becoming more mainstream).

Finding this particular presentation of his ideas' development unnecessary and uninteresting (betraying my preference for analytic philosophy, which, like science, is often unconcerned with its own history), recalling that Harman has relatively few supporters, I shall mostly focus on the latter chapters, where Harman explains his brand of thought. Recognising that "Husserl walled off a space for phenomenology by asking us to ignore the natural reality of objects" (p. 123), Harman asserts that "sense-data are regarded as an arbitrary and narrow restriction of the field of experience" (p. 38) and "human beings are just one more type of object among trillions of others in the cosmos" (p. 124). Whilst acknowledging that "We cannot know exactly what an inanimate object experiences" (p. 132), he rejects the presumption that humans are the "unique fissure across which reality unfolds" (p. 135). In fact, "Every form of linguistic turn, every human-centred approach to philosophy must be rejected" (p. 91).

Harman then explains some of the uses of his object-oriented approach. To common questions about space and time, such as "Are space and time made of quantized chunks, or are they smoothly flowing continua?" and "Are space and time finite or infinite?", he adds "Why do we always speak only of space and time as a pair, with no third or fourth term ever added?" (pp. 143-146). To Harman, "The root duality of the universe is not made up of subject and object... but of *objects and relations*" (p. 156); his is a quantised view of the world (p. 200). Harman then argues that "Each object creates its own internal space, and *ipso facto* its own interior time" (p. 165). As a result, if objects always exist (there is no reason to think that they end up in "a gaping hole of non-being"), then time "must always exist" (pp. 166-167). While his approach here seemingly resolves or avoids "a number of existing trench wars in philosophy", Harman is honest enough to realise the problem that the physical sciences

Book Reviews

have made progress on the understanding of spacetime as a four-dimensional continuum (p. 169).

Harman clarifies that his view is not panpsychic, but polypsychic, since not all entities “have anything like a psyche” (p. 206). He also opposes pantheism, ironically opining that “The idea of a ‘universe as a whole’ actually seems like a fruitless abstraction” (p. 207). Herein lies the weakness of Harman’s work. Like much work in the continental stream of philosophy, his speculative theory contradicts what modern science has revealed, and too easily dismisses other interesting theories, as if forgetting that he, too, appeals to mere possibilities. For example, why not take seriously the view that there is some Aristotelian hypostasis – divine or not – behind his objects? Nevertheless, Harman’s iconoclastic and misanthropic theorising is a step in the right direction for continental philosophy, which seems to have been one of his major goals (pp. 105-108).

Raphael Lataster
University of Sydney

Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London, Rider Books, 2004); pp. xiv + 306; ISBN 978-1-84413-155-6.

In *The Twilight of Atheism*, Anglican priest Alister McGrath argues that ‘atheism’, whatever that is, has had its day in the sun. This is multiply problematic. For one, McGrath’s premise is premature, akin to proponents of the ‘hard’ secularisation thesis, given that the book only just preceded the rise of the New Atheism and flies in the face of demographic data. For two, McGrath’s subtitle refers to the fall of ‘disbelief’, giving the indication that he will critique the broader atheism, when he actually attacks the narrow form, which can be described as ‘hard’ naturalism. And this, despite the fact that he acknowledges on the very first page that “Atheism comes in various forms, its spectrum of possibilities extending from a rather mild absence of belief in God or any supernatural beings to a decidedly more strident and rigorous rejection of any religious belief as manipulative, false, and enslaving” (pp. xi-xii). McGrath alternates between the various

meanings of the term throughout, which makes for a very difficult and frustrating read.

In chapter 1 McGrath seemingly attempts to describe atheism in pre-Modern times, describing the so-called ‘atheisms’ of Socrates and persecuted Roman Christians as ‘not atheism’, with no mention of the many materialists in Ancient Greece and India (pp. 4-9). Chapter 2 describes the French Revolution, partly caused by popular resentment against the established church. This is probably the best chapter of the book, with McGrath realising the challenge for believers presented by the argument from evil (p. 32), and, while still wishing to blame atheism for atrocities committed during the Revolution (pp. 45-46), he accepts that other factors played their part. The generally reasonable third chapter seeks to describe the philosophical foundations of contemporary atheism, with McGrath echoing the notion that, “if belief in God was a response to a human longing for security, might it not also be argued that atheism was a response to the human desire for autonomy?” (pp. 58-59).

The focus is moved to the natural sciences in chapter 4, which is riddled with fallacious reasoning, though McGrath correctly implies that religion and science need not conflict and accepts that Calvin and Wilberforce “demonstrate the utter stupidity of religious thinkers”, regarding their denial of scientific facts (pp. 79-83). He unfortunately claims, without references, that the “notion that the Darwinian theory of evolution has made belief in God impossible... is an important element in underpinning an atheist worldview” (p. 83). Weighing in on the epistemological Clifford-James debate, McGrath ironically declares that atheism “must be demonstrated to be true” and that atheists must share the “burden of proof” with Christians (pp. 92-93). He ponders the validity of agnosticism, failing to count agnostics amongst the a-theistic ranks (pp. 93-94). More surprisingly, McGrath criticises Dawkins on the basis that scientists have been mistaken before, as if it were Dawkins who were committed to an unchanging and dogmatic view of reality (p. 95). He displays no appreciation for the probabilistic – and not absolutist – reasoning that scientists endorse; in fact, McGrath seems to endorse a ‘god of the gaps’ appeal to ignorance, since science doesn’t yet have all the answers (p. 97).

McGrath admits that there are different types of atheism (p. 99), and then wonders if Darwin was an ‘atheist proper’, despite noting “Darwin’s rejection of God” (pp. 104-105). Continuing to confuse,

McGrath asserts that those with no “active religious beliefs” can “legitimately be regarded as atheist” and then immediately draws a distinction with agnostics, without further discussion (p. 111). He also gleefully ends the chapter with the (unreferenced, as is common throughout) claim that “about 40 percent of scientists had some form of personal religious beliefs” seemingly oblivious to the fact that many who hold such beliefs are atheists, as with many Buddhists and Hindus, and even (liberal) Jews and Christians (p. 111).

The fifth chapter, about atheism in Victorian England, continues to play on the ambiguity of the term (p. 122), and paints a reasonable picture of the attempts to demythologise Christ (pp. 138-141). Chapter 6 provides a similarly mixed offering, linking atheism with Marxism and seemingly declaring atheism as being inherently violent (pp. 165-169), whilst acknowledging the need for – and problems with – more liberal forms of Christianity (pp. 158-165). Appealing to Dostoyevsky, McGrath says that atheism can lead to “unprecedented brutality and oppression”, which appears to be a little ironic (pp. 145-146). From the seventh chapter onwards, McGrath, realising that religion was perceived as being in decline up to the early 1970s (p. 173), argues that atheism has since been “losing its appeal” everywhere, which contradicts the data concerning many forms of atheism, and unfairly criticises atheists for trying to include the ‘mere agnostics’ amongst their ranks (p. 174). McGrath’s reasoning for excluding agnostics from ‘Team Atheism’ deserves ridicule, being so absurd that it would make Albert Camus blush: they might eventually become Christians (pp. 174-175). It is doubtful that McGrath would be happy for others to deny his being a Christian, since he could later be convinced of the truth of Zoroastrianism. He does well in accepting that the evidentialist case for God has failed, and that Aquinas’ arguments are presuppositionalist, but too casually brushes aside the *logical* argument from evil, displaying no awareness for the more compelling *evidential* argument from evil (pp. 179-185). McGrath also lacks nuance in supposing that the secularisation thesis has failed, despite the decline of traditional religions, the ongoing evolution of Christianity, and the success of ‘the spiritual other’ (pp. 189-192).

Chapter 8 interestingly explores the possibilities that Protestantism led to atheism, and that it could lead to the death of atheism. In chapter 9 McGrath expresses his view that postmodernism has defeated atheism, when it arguably has defeated traditional religion and proven quite useful for validating many forms of atheism and ‘the other’. McGrath here reduces

atheism to an inaccurate and grotesque caricature, labelling it ‘embarrassingly intolerant’, linking it with Stalinism and Nazism, and further claims that the latter means that atheists cannot criticise, “with integrity”, the “violence and oppression” of religion (pp. 230-235). The forgettable tenth chapter has McGrath unnecessarily discussing the unpleasant Madalyn Murray O’Hair, when he has already mentioned figures that atheists allegedly need to apologise for, like Stalin. Additionally, contradicting much of his book, McGrath surprisingly realises that, “most atheists just ask to be left alone, getting on with their lives peacefully and Godlessly” (p. 254), and he also ends by claiming that atheism’s “star is waning” (p. 256); an interesting prediction considering the almost immediately subsequent rise of the New Atheism. The final chapter continues this – now obviously incorrect – line of thinking, whilst also admitting that atheism has helped Christianity reform itself (pp. 273-277), and bizarrely claiming – especially considering his earlier comment about “most atheists” – that “Atheism is ultimately a worldview of fear” (p. 274).

The Twilight of Atheism is unscholarly, unreferenced, unnuanced, unsophisticated, anachronistic, contradictory, confused, confusing, and facile. McGrath is reacting to something, but is unsure as to what that actually is. On the broader view of atheism McGrath’s claims are outlandishly inaccurate, while on the narrower view his book fails the “so what?” test and even the ‘technically agnostic’ and ‘not ubiquitously anti-religious’ Richard Dawkins would be excluded. His focus on Stalinism as representative of atheism is disgraceful, and is akin to focussing on ISIS as evincing the failure of Islam. Living up to his reputation as a theologian, priest, and Christian apologist, McGrath provides no evidence to backup many of his central claims, and could have been convinced of abandoning his project after simply perusing the data presented by the likes of Pippa Norris and Steve Bruce; he would have been better off discussing the twilight of traditional religion. Contra McGrath, atheism is alive and well, and is here to stay.

Raphael Lataster
University of Sydney

Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2005); pp. 356; ISBN 978-0-8028-6346-1.

As an exiled Jew in the United States and a post-war philosopher, Hannah Arendt has grappled with the failure of moral and political judgment in the twentieth century that she believed led to the atrocities of WWII. In so doing, Arendt has dealt with the question of judgment extensively throughout her work. From her insight that Eichmann's 'banality of evil' was made possible because of a lack of judgment, to her later work on judgment in political life, culminating in the attempt to write a book on judgment as the third volume in her magnum opus, *The Life of the Mind*, judgment for Arendt is about thinking; it is a rational act. Thinking in this way is not to be equated with the sense of understanding and knowing, but (following Kant's division between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*) thinking in this mode drives us beyond what we know, an orientation towards thinking driven by questioning and seeking meaning. Such thinking does not look for an ultimate answer, but queries anew the meaning of events and experiences encountered. This is thinking as it is related to the activity of political life for Arendt.

Much like Arendt, Oliver O'Donovan in his work grapples with the loss of traditions and institutions, and the significance for modernity. In his book, *The Ways of Judgment*, O'Donovan focuses in the role of judgment that makes public and political life possible. O'Donovan defines judgment as "an act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context" (p. 7). Central to O'Donovan's definition of judgment is the requirement for a stable moral framework that informs public discourse. For O'Donovan, the Christian tradition originally provided the authority (and thereby the continuity) that made judgment possible. His own point of reference is 'The Gospel' proclamation, which he takes to be the proper framework through which to interpret existing social and political realities. He therefore aims to set out, what he calls, a "Christian political ethics" (p. ix). This he says is not to provide a form of 'legitimation' of contemporary liberal politics: "The Christian faith is not to be offered to the world as the only hope for democracy and human rights" (p. xiv). For this reason, his project is steered "by political rather than by theological questions" (p. ix) that argue for "the coherence of political conceptions as such" (p. ixv).

The chapters in this book are clearly structured, each investigating in detail concepts central to modern liberal democratic societies such as justice, equality, freedom, representation, and authority. Each of these is analyzed in their historical development informed by monotheistic Judeo-Christian theological presuppositions. It is here that O'Donovan's research is exemplary. This is also perhaps the strongest contribution of the book to the current debates around the problem of legitimacy in modern democracies. For a Christian readership, or those who wish to understand the politico-theological roots of contemporary liberal society, this book will be of great interest.

Yet perhaps the weakness as a defense of judgment lies in the presumed theological foundation. In aiming to retrieve the language of the knowledge of the good, informed by "theological description" (p. xiv), O'Donovan at times strikes a tone of admonishing the reader who may not be able to accept all of, or even parts of, the theological vision implicit in O'Donovan's book. Knowing one's history is important. O'Donovan talks about the need for recollection of one's own past in order to act in the present and orient (or even imagine) a future (p. 90). Yet, the vision that might encourage action remains bleak. According to O'Donovan, modernity is without God: "The conscientious individual as conceived by modernity is a distorted version of something genuinely redemptive, the evangelical summons to be judge of ourselves" (p. 312); therefore redemption is lost to modernity. Instead, Christians find salvation in the faith of the church, accepting "the task of the church in the world", continuing "the transmission of the church, mediating it and purifying it" until the time of the kingdom of heaven, where both the worldly political and counter-political institutions of the church will be redundant (pp. 315-318). This seems a desolate 'other-worldly' form of 'Christian political ethics', if it can be called a political ethic at all.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his final writings while imprisoned during World War II, grappled with the question of how the church might be the church in modernity. He firmly believed the old metaphysical notions of God were dead, including Christian attempts to keep God central in society. He famously refers to this world as having come "of age", as no longer requiring God "as its guardian", despite attempts by Christians to keep a space for God on "so-called ultimate questions" such as death and guilt (see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8 [Minneapolis, MN:

Book Reviews

Fortress Press, 2010], pp. 426-7). Attempts by Christians to draw God back into public life, as some kind of guardian of the moral order, he considered 'ignoble'. Instead, human autonomy requires that the world manage its own affairs, including governance. Christians too must "live as those who manage without God" (Bonhoeffer, p. 478) and suffer with God's own exile from the world. Importantly, this is to celebrate both the goodness and strength of life, and to take responsibility for failed actions, such as governance in the world. This sense of responsibility is what led Bonhoeffer to join the *Abwehr* as a double agent.

Hannah Arendt shares Bonhoeffer's view that modernity cannot simply retrieve the past, and this includes the stable moral Christian framework that has made shared judgment possible. Instead of retrieving this structure, Arendt argues that judgment in modernity can only take place "without preconceived categories and... without the set of customary rules which is morality" (Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954* [New York: Schocken Books, 1994], p. 321); she refers to this as "thinking without a banister" (Tracy B. Strong, *Politics without Vision: Thinking without a Banister in the Twentieth Century* Strong [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012], p. 334). For Arendt, this is the only way judgment is still possible in a contemporary age that no longer believes in universal rules.

Bonhoeffer as a Christian theologian grappled with the condition of a world that is 'come of age' in its desire to be autonomous, and the place of Christian action in such a world. Arendt likewise spent a lifetime considering how political life might still be possible in a world without universals. Both took seriously the question of a world without God, or the guarantee of theological structures to uphold shared life together. Bonhoeffer and Arendt are examples of the kind of analysis of theological and political ideas that are helpful to an audience that encompasses more than the faithful elect. If judgment is to be possible in today's world, it must come through modes of thinking that question and seek meaning in the context of the world, as it understands itself, not as we might like it to be.

Petra Brown
Deakin University

Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Valdimir Solovyov* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2009); pp. xviii + 297; ISBN 978-0-8014-7479-8.

The speculations on Divine Wisdom or Sophia in the thought of the nineteenth century Russian philosopher, theologian and poet Vladimir Solovyov played an integral role in the adoption of Sophiology by several key thinkers of the movement known as the Russian Religious Renaissance. The intriguing concept of Divine Wisdom is employed by the Russian Sophiologists as a unifying principle or *metaxu* between God and creation, which incorporates all of the material cosmos into a union with the Divine. In *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, Judith Deutsch Kornblatt provides a penetrating insight into the elaborate notion of Sophia in the thought of its modern progenitor Valdimir Solovyov. The catalyst for Solovyov's focus on Divine Wisdom develops from not only a scholarly treatment of its various traditional understandings but more interestingly from three 'intimate visitations' from a figure he interprets as manifestations of Sophia. Kornblatt succeeds in illuminating the multifarious thought of Solovyov's Sophiology by combining the historical intimations of Wisdom explored by Solovyov and a lucid account of the context surrounding his thought together with a selection of annotated translations from his Wisdom oeuvre. The result is a fascinating survey into the thought of Divine Wisdom by one of its most influential thinkers in the modern Russian period.

The Book is divided into two sections. In part one, Kornblatt provides a contextual framework for the notion of Sophia that dominates large parts of Solovyov's writings. Fittingly titled 'Who is Solovyov and What is Sophia?', the salient features of Solovyov's thought on Wisdom is outlined and embedded within a relevant panorama of his life and the cultural milieu to which he belonged. Kornblatt's strength here is in highlighting the idiosyncratic elements of a thinker who is capable of providing both rigorous intellectual output and childlike self-deprecating humour, often targeting his obsession with Sophia. Solovyov's postulations on Divine Wisdom rely on an intermingling of Eastern spirituality, Christian Trinitarian theology, Gnosticism and German Idealism that is developed out of a broad intellectual examination into a variety of philosophical and theological sources throughout the ages. It is this

historical development of Wisdom utilised by Solovyov that Kornblatt dedicates the majority of this first section towards.

Beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures, an overview of the relatable Wisdom texts – specifically those of the book of Proverbs which appear to present Wisdom as an ontologically ambiguous principle which is both created/uncreated – is followed by an outline of the Platonic and Neoplatonic articulations of the ‘Logos’ which for Solovyov provided a link between the Christian God and both Jewish and Hellenistic Idealism. The pages dedicated to the Christian Scriptures and the Patristic Fathers is rather brief and could be further illuminated through a closer inspection into the Alexandrian Fathers - especially Athanasius. Whilst Kornblatt does not intend this study to be purely theological, considering Solovyov’s Orthodox background, the study on early Christian literature could benefit from greater nuance. Following this is an insightful section titled ‘Mother Moist Earth and Russian Images of Divine Wisdom’. Here Kornblatt touches upon the link between the association of the feminine and more specifically the Theotokos – Mary the Mother of God – present in Byzantine Iconography and Sophia. The ambiguous imagery of the Wisdom of God depicted in the Churches dedicated to Sophia in Novgorod and Kiev further highlight the mystical presence of Sophia in the Russian theological landscape. The first section concludes with an examination into the pertinent modern influences on Solovyov including the mysticism of Jacob Boehme and the Idealism of Friedrich Schelling. Kornblatt’s objective in the first half of the book is to highlight the reservoir of thought drawn upon by Solovyov, which shape the expression of his work. This is achieved by an emphasis on the fact that no single school of thought or individual alone provided the lexicon for Solovyov to express his ideas on Sophia, instead his work is a total synthesis of traditions spanning millennia and interpreted with imaginative authenticity.

The second part of the book contains a collection of annotated translations of Solovyov’s Wisdom writings. Aided in these translations by Boris Jakim and Laury Magnus, Kornblatt prefaces each work with a reading guide that provides sufficient context to the writings. In order to best capture the varied nature of Solovyov’s imaginative thought on Wisdom, this section collects a range of excerpts from several genres including Sophianic poems, mystical/theological dialogues, philosophical prose, plays and short stories. Noteworthy in this section is the excerpts from the ‘Lectures on Divine Humanity’ given in St. Petersburg between

1878-1880 which aimed at presenting the true meaning of religion as that which seeks to unite man and creation with the unconditional and whole principle. In these lectures, Solovyov expresses wisdom as “the ideal or perfect humanity, eternally contained in the integral divine being, or Christ”. Similarly, the final work of this section titled ‘Three Encounters: Final Poema’ is a captivating poem that touches upon the personal affinity the Russian has with Sophia. In this work, Solovyov’s personal experiences of Sophia are pronounced through a poetic journey at once embracing the mystical nature of his visions and also humorously mocking his lifelong obsession with Divine Wisdom. The compilation of these varied works provides a comprehensive view into the breadth of styles that Solovyov was able to use to express his Sophianic speculations.

In offering a comprehensive contextual basis for the threads of Solovyov’s thought and by walking the reader through some of his most pertinent Wisdom texts, Kornblatt is able to make this intricate thinker and elusive topic both graspable and fascinating. The inclusion of humorous anecdotes and illustrations such as Solovyov’s ‘automatic’ writing provide a refreshing insight into the mind of this multifaceted thinker. As a tool to help initiate one into Russian roots of Sophiology, and Vladimir Solovyov, this book is of immense worth.

Lawrence Qummou
University of Notre Dame Australia

Peter Szendy, *Phantom Limbs: On Musical Bodies*, Will Bishop, trans. (New York, Fordham University Press, 2016); pp. 193; ISBN 978-0-8232-6706-4.

Philosopher and musicologist Peter Szendy discusses many things that we, as listeners and as musicians, might take for granted. He makes us aware of, and alive to, the contact between instrument and body, finger and key, and so on. His book made me aware of how many elements of embodiment we take for granted in an era in which performance is increasingly embodied, in the sense that we now focus heavily on how to make performance safe for our bodies (for example, Alexander technique, ergonomic adaptations for instruments, acoustic controls within the orchestra

pit, and so on). Szendy reconnects us to the realities of what we are hearing in terms of bodies every time we listen to music: “a sequence of *articulations of organs*” (p. 157, italics Szendy’s).

This slim volume conceals an encyclopaedic and kaleidoscopic knowledge of music history and music theory, and is as much music history as philosophy. Among the musicological aspects it traces are the development of keyboard instruments and associated techniques, and the change in status and authority of the instrumentalist. I found some of the most fascinating and also moving aspects of the book to be the vast wealth of sometimes obscure, often apparently parenthetical musical observations Szendy includes, often in footnotes, including: Stockhausen’s *Helikopter Streichquartett*, Korean American multimedia artist Nam June Paik, and eighteenth century Czech canon Prokop Diviš and his experiments in electricity.

Szendy focuses often on keyboard instruments and instrumentalists, which initially seemed an odd choice to me. When considering instruments becoming extensions of musicians’ bodies, my first thoughts ran to instruments most embraced physically in performance: violoncelli and harps, or wind instruments with their intimate connection with the breath. Yet it becomes apparent that Szendy uses the keyboard and its mechanisms as only one example of the complex interactions between musician, instrument and sound: the intricate inner workings of the keyboard instrument, hidden behind its wooden casing, connect unseen the fingers and feet with hammers, pedals and wires. Rather than distancing the musician from the instrument, Szendy creates a constructive hermeneutic where musician and instrument are equally sonorous bodies, operating in relation to one another, a “conjoint sonorous becoming” (p. 135).

Discussion of the figure of the conductor begins with a lovely collection of quotations and histories describing the development of the role from a time-beater who gets in the way of the music to “a fascinating telepathic machine” (p. 128), allowing Szendy to explore the electrical connection that for him transforms orchestras, and even their audiences, into single organic bodies: “The conductor has become a kind of tele-keyboardist, transmitting from afar a flow about which we do not know – about which nothing allows us to say – if it metaphorically disengages the glaring energy received, or, literally, the current that prolongs it toward the musicians. And... toward the audience... touching, commotion at a distance” (p. 129).

Through examining both the individual instrumentalist and the ensemble, Szendy distils *Phantom Limbs* into two core hypotheses: that the “developments of group telethesia and telharmony... were already... prefigured *in nucleo* in the conformation or fabrication of a simple singular body grappling with an instrument”, and conversely, that “something of the contagion in a crowd... was already operating in the singular compositions and apprehensions” of a single musician in contact with an instrument – “was it not the magnetism of a *crowd of fingers* that the pianist described while watching Lizst’s arborescent hand?” (p. 156).

My only criticism is that Szendy’s use of musical examples from recent decades is limited. German composer Helmut Lachenmann is one of the only living composers whose music Szendy addresses, although he has much to say about the electronic and internet age and the extended possibilities for phantom bodies these present. I look forward to future work of his on this subject.

Sarah Penicka-Smith
University of Sydney

Denis Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (New York, T & T Clark, 2010); pp. 177; ISBN 978-0-567-03366-6.

Denis Minns’ introduction to Irenaeus proves how much still we can learn from a systematic, critical and comprehensive *resourcement*, if conducted from a solid point of view and not simply as an antiquarian exploration of the Christian past, or from the point of view of apologetics. The book is a valuable contribution not simply to the study of Irenaeus’ life and work, but also to the way his thought can influence our contemporary problematisation of the Christian tradition, and the conceptual frameworks we employ in order to understand the development of Christian theology. Irenaeus’ surviving works, *Adversus Heresies* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, are two of the most important sources for the understanding for the development of Christian theology between 100 and 300 CE, long before Nicaea and therefore before the standardisation of doctrine. Because of this, “ironically, Irenaeus, the great defender of orthodoxy and unchanging

tradition, allows us to see that orthodoxy is not monolithic, that before Augustine's influence exerted itself in the West, there was a fully articulate orthodox theology suffused with an optimism and a confidence, which have largely disappeared from the Western tradition after Augustine" (p. 152).

However, despite his foregrounding of such early pluralistic orthodoxy, Minns offers a very cautious, and somehow conservative exegesis of Irenaeus' work which, on one hand helps contemporary readers to encounter his thought within its proper historical and social context without, on the other, pointing out its theological innovation. 'Innovation' of course would have been an affront to Irenaeus himself, as Minns argues elsewhere in the book; but there are some distinct elements in his thinking, which probably needed further elaboration, especially in regards to his understanding of biblical authority. Minns insists to seeing him as the 'first Catholic theologian' and somehow sees him within the ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church; Irenaeus however belongs to a de-centralised and flat structure of semi-autonomous bishoprics and this had an impact on his theology. The ecclesiological perception of his office must be taken more seriously when we talk about his theology: he was a not a mystic with a personal theology, but a bishop with a specific role to perform, in a remote area of the Roman Empire.

The chapters explore one by one the most persistent concerns in Irenaeus' work. They start exploring his most famous aspect, his refutation of heresies, mainly Marcionite and Valentinian Gnosticism (Chapters One and Two) while explicating on his perception of the unity and the oneness of God, something that most Gnostics implicitly or explicitly denied. Other chapters discuss his Trinitarian ideas; Chapter Four is, in my view, central for the understanding of Minns' approach to his subject as he explores the most important belief of early Christianity in the Trinity. The final chapters also explore the divine economy of salvation, the transformation of Adam into Christ and finally the promise of the Kingdom. In the conclusion Minns brings all his analysis together; Irenaeus regains his central position in early Christian formulation of the doctrine not simply as polemic against the non-Christians or the quasi-Christians but for the articulation of the doctrine, before the gradual emergence of Platonism and Origenism in the

formulation of Christian theology. Minns insists that the central aspect of Irenaeus' theology is the privileging of the materiality of the human body, of the significance of the incarnation and of the constant care of God for his creation. Here one can find the most important contribution of the book as it stresses that humans cannot respond to the grace of God "unless we fully embrace the condition of creaturehood" (p. 154).

In his significant 2005 book on Irenaeus (*Irenaeus of Lyons*) Eric Osborn extended his somehow fragmentary theology with contemporary philosophical and cultural conversations. Minns' books emphasises on the contextualisation on his work, but I am afraid that, even despite his own intentions, it imprisons Irenaeus' thinking within the Roman Catholic tradition, its dilemmas and *aporias*. Yet, his insistence on corporeality makes Irenaeus a thinker in conversation with contemporary theories of embodiment which re-affirm the centrality of the human person as a carnal reality, and a unique material presence. Some interesting conclusions could have been drawn from Chapter Four, where the exploration of the Trinitarian deity takes place, but Minns hints at them without elaboration. He points out certain references in Irenaeus' own work but he himself avoids all forms of hypotheses or inferences that could make them cohesive by reconstructing their semantic horizons.

The book is a very good and systematic introduction to Irenaeus' work both for students and scholars: it points out the general structures of his thinking, indicates its central parameters and explores its basic tenets. It is a useful and insightful study although it examines Irenaeus in an un-dialogic isolation. However, his anthropology could have been more explicitly discussed, as well as his fear of Hellenic philosophy. In his surviving works Irenaeus appears as a theologian who still maintains a strong sense of continuity with the recent past but he tries in all possible ways to carry it forward against the background of the ongoing Gnostic disruption. Minns' work offers a brilliant contextualisation but leaves open the meaning of his relevance; it seems to follow the general hermeneutical guidelines on patristics of John Paul II and Benedict XVI about the 'tradition that has come down to us through a succession of bishops.' A further under-utilised aspect of Irenaeus' work is his potential contrast to early figures like Justin or later like Clement of Alexandria or Origen. Minns has started a

Book Reviews

conversation about the early period of Christian tradition, which needs to be continued.

Vrasidas Karalis
University of Sydney