

## Review of Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter*

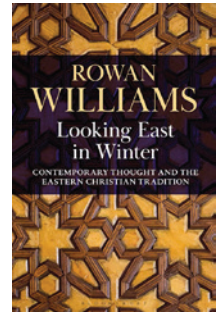
Michael Plekon

*Looking East in Winter* is a diverse and rich collection of essays from Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury and a professor at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Throughout his scholarly and pastoral work, Williams has often taken it upon himself to present lesser-known treasures of Eastern Christian thought to the West in an interesting and accessible way. The present volume is just such a collection. In eleven remarkable essays, Williams explores the characteristic ways in which the Eastern Church, down through the centuries, has understood Christ's invitation to follow after Him, to hear the Good News and, importantly, to practice it in everyday life. The voices from within the tradition that this work brings forward are diverse; he covers a vast expanse of eastern Christian theology, from the writers in the *Philokalia*—"fathers" such as Maximos the Confessor and Evagrius—to authors closer to our own time including Mother Maria Skobtsova, Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Lossky, George Florovsky, John Zizioulas and Olivier Clément. Great Orthodox thinkers such as Ivan Kireyevsky, Aleksey Khomyakov, Vladimir Solovyev, Sergii Bulgakov, Georges Florovsky, and Vladimir Lossky are also considered, and there is a substantial paper on "holy fools" in both Byzantine and Russian thought.

This gesture toward the Christian East on the part of the former Archbishop

of Canterbury should not come as a surprise. Starting with his doctoral dissertation on Vladimir Lossky almost a half-century ago, Williams has been a leading scholar of Eastern Christian thought. Over the course of his career, he has produced brilliant studies of Sergii Bulgakov and Fyodor Dostoevsky, numerous works on Christology, and scholarship on essential figures of early Christianity such as Paul, Arius, and Augustine. He has also written on Western mystics and spiritual masters such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. His writing has been academic but supremely pastoral as well, including many accessible articles on baptism, the Eucharist, prayer, the cross, and resurrection.

The first two sections of this collection take us back to the world of the *Philokalia*, an anthology of texts from early theological and spiritual writers. While these texts are challenging to twenty-first-century readers, Williams is a most able guide, taking us through the "quest for God," the project of a holy life, which is the focus of these writers. Through them, he touches on the idea of participating in God or deification, as well as the pathway of prayer from the mind to the heart. While some critics, such as Alexander Schmemmann, have questioned the esoteric, almost gnostic fascination with the *Philokalia* and have seen little connection between this approach to spirituality and the life of the people of God, Williams's



Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021.

skill in treating this subject allows us to connect these early writers with our own lives and our own time. Williams also includes a fresh reassessment of a central aspect of Eastern Church theology—tradition—as an ongoing communal action, in sync with liturgy and prayer.

There are surprises here, too. Defying a stereotypical view of Eastern Christianity as completely other-worldly, given to retreat from society and politics, Williams reveals how liturgy and prayer shape and gift a Christian humanism. He points to the passion for justice and love of neighbor embodied in the lives of Skobtsova and her co-workers in Paris, sent to death in the concentration camps for protecting their brothers and sisters—their neighbors—as targets of the Gestapo. Williams shares a beautiful vision of how Mother Maria saw service of neighbor as imitation of the Mother of God in her love for and suffering along with her Son. He invokes the expression used by Clément, echoed by John Chrysostom and Mother Maria, of the “sacrament of the brother/sister” that should follow naturally from the sacrament of the table (143). Perhaps his interest in this applied, social aspect of faith is inspired in part by his own close encounters with some of the most terrible events of our time. He experienced the horrors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks firsthand, as he was present in New York City and scheduled to speak at Trinity Church on Wall Street when the towers were hit. And within days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, he published a strong condemnation of the destructive policies of Vladimir Putin, tragically supported by Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

At the heart of *Looking East in Winter* is a tour de force exploration of

two centuries of Russian theological creativity. Our rediscovery of the distinctive churchly character or *sobornost* and of the catholic and Eucharistic qualities of church owe much to these nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers, as do our commitments to ecumenical work and care for the neighbor in need. As Williams shows, these Russian thinkers inspired and joined with Western theologians—moved by an ecumenical impulse—to “return to the sources” and rediscover the Church as more than hierarchy, doctrines, and rules.

Following from this, Williams presents Clément’s less familiar thinking as an anthropology of worship and a sacrament pointing toward a liturgical humanism. As an epilogue, he invites readers to see the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist through the eyes of Zizioulas, a longtime proponent of the church as eucharistic community. This is a most appropriate conclusion to the collection, for it summarizes and restates many of the themes laid out in earlier sections. We are not just waiting for the kingdom to come, for the last days. Rather, as not only Zizioulas but also Bulgakov, Nicholas Afanasiev, Paul Evdokimov, and Schmemmann tell us, we are liturgical, eucharistic beings. In the community of the people of God, as a contemporary Lutheran liturgical text puts it—echoing the *Didache*—at the table of the Lord we are given a “foretaste of the feast to come.” We are already living in the paradise of God’s kingdom, and as Williams notes, this reality has consequences for how we live in our world, how we regard nature, wealth, our relations with each other—in short, what we really live for. This brings us round to where Williams began, thinking about the lives of holiness

already manifested by so many “living icons,” women and men of faith gone before and still among us.

The book’s title stems from an image by Diadochos of Photike: “Looking east in winter we feel the warmth of the sun on our faces, while still sensing an icy chill at our backs ” (18).

So, too, with what Williams offers us in these essays: more than a hint of the warmth and light of the Spirit, despite the cold of our world. What else should we have expected from so gifted a scholar and pastor as Rowan Williams? Once more, as in his other writings, we are served a feast, with much to ponder and make our own. ✱

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