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# Returning to Reality: Christian Platonism for our Times, Paul Tyson

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**Returning to Reality: Christian Platonism for our Times**, Paul Tyson, Lutterworth, 2015 (ISBN 978-0-7188-9385-9), x + 218 pp., pb £17.50

Tyson's impassioned call for a reinvigoration of Christian Platonism is thought provoking and a joy to read. Above all *Returning to Reality* succeeds as a masterful statement of the problem, as Tyson sees it, of a hollowed out Christianity divorced from its metaphysical roots in late modernity. In three concise parts, Tyson offers (1) an outline of a Christian understanding of reality, (2) a sketch of the historical process that led to the near universally assumed implausibility of Platonism, and (3) an all-too-brief recommendation for the future.

Tyson opens with an admirably accessible exposition of the basic contours of Christian Platonism 'without any reference to the likes of Augustine or Aquinas' (p. 8). Here, Western metaphysics is divided into two broad schools. One takes the world and everything in it to be essentially as it appears to be (a 'one-dimensional metaphysic') while the other sees the realm of the apparent as derivative of a more fundamental transcendent reality (a 'three-dimensional metaphysic'). Drawing on the example of his daughter Emma, Tyson argues that despite our modern preoccupation with the one-dimensional outlook, it is the three-dimensional Platonic approach that remains more intuitively obvious (pp. 15–22). The second chapter elaborates on what he means by Christian Platonism via the example of the fiction of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. Tyson's argument here is that both Lewis and Tolkien embrace the metaphysical vision he has in view, and therefore we in the twenty-first century are already basically familiar with, even open to, Christian Platonism. The appeal to imaginative literature is telling as the positive case for Christian Platonism offered later rests on an aesthetic choice for a more holistic and beautiful worldview than that on offer in secular modernity.

Part Two opens with an extended look at the competing and incompatible mythoi of Modernity and Christian Platonism. In an amusing re-imagining of the Genesis Creation narrative, Tyson lays bare the story of the rise of modern rationality out of the primordial ooze of myth and superstition. This is the familiar story one encounters in much popular history, especially the history of science, which is uncritically accepted by New Atheists and (ironically) many theists too. There follows a much more historically accurate and intellectually honest re-telling of the story of the rise of modernity. In particular, Tyson takes aim at twin 'false aspects of the myth of modernity [...] (1) philosophy is all about the triumph of logos (reason) over mythos (understood as imagined and false stories), and [...] (2) modern philosophy has no debt to medieval theology' (p. 51). Drawing especially on the legacy of Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham, Tyson argues that 'the true story of the birth of modernity is a medieval story'. Indeed, *contra* the myth of modernity 'medieval *theology* is the real womb of modernity' (p. 60).

Chapters 4 and 5 take up the question of fit between Platonism and Christianity. Biblical scholars will find plenty to dispute in the argument that there are many significant 'underlying metaphysical commonalities' connecting 'Plato and the New Testament worldview' (p. 78). Not the least here among the issues left underdeveloped is the idea that there is a unified New Testament worldview. In fact, Tyson tends throughout to assume a single Christian understanding when it comes to metaphysics in particular but also many of the classic loci of doctrinal theology (Christology, soteriology, etc.). The overall argument would be much strengthened by taking up the actual pluralism of belief among self-described Christians. Much more convincing than the biblical case is that made on behalf of the Christian nature of Christian Platonism in the fifth chapter. However, here too there is an unsatisfying dearth of argument in support of just what constitutes 'Christianity'.

Tyson returns to the history of philosophy in the sixth chapter to explore how the normative Christian Platonism of the Patristic period came to fall from favor by the seventeenth century. Five major moments are identified as the collective culprits: 'Abelard's attack on naïve realism', 'the trend towards the parting of faith and reason after 1277', 'Scotus and Ockham's [...] undercutting ontological participation, replacing divine reason and love with sovereign will, and demarcating religion from nature and power', 'the sixteenth-century development of the idea of "pure nature" and the disenchantment of the cosmos', and the 'final fall [...] via the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century where knowledge [*scientia*] comes to interpret wisdom [*sapientia*]' (p. 150). There is, perhaps, more defense than is warranted of the role played by Aquinas in the divorce between reason and faith at work here. After all, while the truths of philosophy cannot conflict with the truths of revelation for the Angelic Doctor, the latter is vouched safe by arguments rooted in authority (*Summa Theologiae* Ia.1.8). Oddly missing in this re-telling of the history of Western intellectual development are the 'Dark Age' figures of Boethius and John Scotus Eriugena, the Renaissance Neoplatonists (Cusanus, Ficino, etc.) and the early modern Cambridge Platonists (Cudworth, More, Smith, etc.). Attention to these countervailing voices would have added breadth and depth to the argument that the dominant trajectory was an unfortunate, and more importantly, unnecessary turn of events.

Tyson next turns to a critique of modern scientific rationality drawing usefully from the work of Thomas Kuhn, Michel Henry, and Lloyd Gerson (pp. 158–181). It is here that the book is at its most sophisticated and original yet the conclusion amounts to little more than the observation that 'it is precisely because we are culturally committed to a modern vision of truth itself that Plato's approach to truth seems impossible for us' (p. 181). The chief virtue of the argument is in the clarity of the presentation of the challenge to the modern recovery of Christian Platonism.

The volume closes with a call to 'return to reality' by embracing 'Analogy, narrative, poetry, art, music, prayer, religion, conversation, and life lived in the contemplation and enactment of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True' for this is both the heart of authentic Christianity and 'what philosophy as the love of wisdom is really all about' (p. 192).

There is much to appreciate in Tyson's book. He is I think correct to challenge the easy assumption of we late moderns that faith and reason are like oil and water. He is correct too in his call for a renewed exploration of the Christian Platonist tradition as a living theological resource. The project however remains far from finished. This is partly because of Tyson's effort to keep his argument accessible and the attendant lack of philosophical and theological detail on offer. Partly this is because an important strand of modern criticism of the Platonic tradition is missing here. The association of Plato and Platonism with totalitarianism, made (in)famous by Karl Popper, is ignored by Tyson. Regardless of what one may make of Popper's arguments, surely one of the reasons for progressive democrats continued rejection of Christian Platonism, even as the flaws of secular reason become increasingly apparent, is the common assessment that Platonic ideals lead to authoritarian regimes.

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**Revelation as Testimony: A Philosophical-Theological Study**, Mats Wahlberg, Eerdmans, 2014 (ISBN 978-0-8028-6988-3), 256 pp., pb \$20

This book offers a cogent defense of non-reductionist accounts of revelation as involving propositional testimony. This thesis runs against the grain of theologies of revelation most prevalent since the Enlightenment, which seems to erect a false binary between 'static' and cold propositionalist construals of revelation and purportedly personal, dynamic, and non-propositional ones. The aim, then, is to argue that propositions form an 'essential' ingredient to a proper account of revelation (p. 16), not least because Wahlberg is convinced that genuine knowledge of God can only be attained or rationally justified if a 'potent natural theology or propositional revelation' is available (p. 12). Chapters 2 and 3 argue for precisely this thesis, as Wahlberg also counters non-propositionalist accounts of revelation as putatively raised, in different shades, by figures like Pannenberg, Schleiermacher, Rahner, Barth, and Thiemann, and Millbank. Wahlberg's claim is that propositions remain