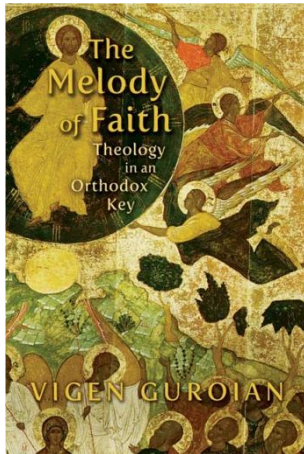


Vigen Guroian



The Melody of Faith: Theology in an Orthodox Key

Wm. B. Eerdmans, Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2010, 136 pages + notes

Reviewed by Anthony J. Elia

In the preface of Vigen Guroian's accessibly manageable tome, he offers readers a vignette about a comment the editor-in-chief of Eerdmans Publishing once made to him regarding his style of scholarship. To quote the editor: "Vigen, you write tone poems." It is then quite expected that the author begins this fine work with a statement about its structure, which to those steeped in Western Latin Christianity may seem foreign or stylistically unclear. He writes "[the book's] coherence and organization are less architectonic than musical. This is consistent with the general character of Orthodox Christian theology," (xi). But it is just this statement which is most helpful and welcome, and from the viewpoint of this reviewer, fits nicely into the breadth of Orthodox theology in general.

The Melody of Faith: Theology in an Orthodox Key might initially come off as having a slightly comical title. But it is far from that. In fact, it is a finely crafted text with an absolutely suitable and apropos title, which

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should invite a broad range of readership - from the more academic to an ecumenical laity in other Orthodox professions of faith *and* Latin Christianities. The author often writes in tonal and musical metaphor when speaking about faith in the Orthodox traditions, which could turn some readers off, but again it is the perfect medium and style for both the narratives (or "tone poems") and the theologies discussed. Not only does this lexical style describe the iconographic and melodic structures of Orthodoxy, it elevates and vivifies it with vibrant, sophisticated, and reflectively relevant theological panache. See for example, the chapter titles themselves: 1. The Litany of Creation, 2. The Luminous Moment of the Apocalypse, 3. Divine Therapy, 4. Mother of God, Mother of Holiness, 5. The Victorious Cross, and 6. The Rhythm of the Resurrection. This last chapter is significantly bold and dramatic, and offers a tonal style that is well worth exploring.

In the first chapter, *The Litany of Creation*, Guroian discourses on partnerships of temporal and spiritual themes, notably Creation, humanity, the world, and God. Specifically, it is a mix of personal reflection (which introduces this chapter nicely) and commentary on the Armenian liturgy and hymnody (5, 22), for example, while keeping in mind the principal foundation of Creation and its relation to human versus Godly time (8-10) and the renewal through the sacred week as octave (21-23). If one were to judge this mechanically, it could be perceived as a slightly disjointed but thematically coherent vision of Creation, with emphasis on the idea of time - which will be discussed further in Chapter 2. Yet, he pulls it off successfully, and with that subtle evocation as "tone poem."

Chapter 2, *The Luminous Moment of the Apocalypse*, is an intriguing assessment of the apocalyptic from the perspective of temporal language, where the author compares the idea of "beginning" and "end" in both human and Godly terms: the latter being distinguished, because we as humans cannot understand divine time. Guroian defines apocalypse by discussing its original uses and context as "unveiling" and "to expose to full view" (26), thus stripping the term of its connotations of disastrous end-time, often trumpeted in popular usage. Another intriguing, yet welcome observation of the author is his discussion on the paradox of the proximity of Christ - both near and far - which serves the narrative of time and Creation well in this chapter, and will offer readers a worthy challenge for discussion.

The third chapter, *Divine Therapy*, which may have one of the most evocative and palliative titles, draws us away from the conversation on Creation and time, and moves us more toward an understanding of what roles Jesus Christ plays in the world, specifically as a healing, almost

mystical medical practitioner. The chapter starts with a quote from St. Cyril of Jerusalem calling Jesus "the healer" and "physician of souls and bodies, curer of spirits, ...and leading minds into light," (43). The author expounds on this through a discussion of *soteria* and *salvare* and their relation to "healing" in contrast with "saving" (57), which gives the reader a significantly different linguistic, liturgical, and theological sensitivity when considering these terms.

Chapter 4, *Mother of God, Mother of Holiness* is a pivotal chapter, in this reviewer's opinion, because its focus on the mother of God is highly developed and shows a richly woven discussion, which is both informative and provocative - and moves the theological narrative of the book as a whole toward fruition. It also details some of the distinctions between Western Latin Christianity and the Orthodox traditions, such as how the Orthodox do not embrace the Immaculate Conception (75). Though not completely clear at some points, the author seems to construct an apologetic around the more traditional theological understandings of Mary, while defending against possible modern appropriations of her (such as liberation or feminist theologies), and opts for a doxological description of Mary's Magnificat instead (79). This chapter is an exposition on contrast between "Eve" and "Mary" (or "Second Eve"), meant to distinguish the merits of Mary (as cautious and skeptical) over Eve (as submissive and fickle); ultimately, we may look at this as a nugget of advanced Orthodox Mariology, embodied in the sentence "Mary's sanctified life is a model of holiness and perfection for all persons...and fickleness could never be attributed to her character," (67). Her greatness too is expressed in the fact that she possessed the maternity of both man and God, but *also* experienced the crucifixion.

The penultimate chapter, entitled *The Victorious Cross*, is a lesson and treatise on staurocentric theology. Focusing on Christ and the cross (or "on the" cross), the author deftly examines the subtleties of the cross and crucifixion traditions in Orthodox iconography. Specifically, he discusses the nuances between *Christus Triumphans* and *Christus Patiens* in different iconographic representations (98-103). The chapter moves toward a critical interpretation of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (105-114). At first it seems to be subtly apologetic, but then turns into a more frontal critique and ultimately a theological re-writing and re-crafting of Gibson's screenplay, which comes off as slightly pedantic, but serves the reader well as a lesson in Orthodox understanding of crucifixion and resurrection.

The final chapter is both redemptive and healing. "The Rhythm of the Resurrection" (Ch. 6) pulls together the essence of Christian finality in the message and being of the resurrection. Most poignantly, Guroian recounts the story of a friend in Armenia, who lost a child in an earthquake, and

speaks through a Pauline vision of the body and resurrection, arriving at a moment of revelation: that the father will see his dead son one day again. Here we see the Christological victory over death and the recognition of how much the resurrection plays a part in community and society - in this case Armenian culture. The chapter and book end with the full sense of rebirth and renewal through the resurrection. As the author writes his last line: "This truly is the eighth day and the first day of the New Creation (136)."

The book overall echoes the structure and thematic vibrancy of Kallistos Ware's classic *The Orthodox Way*. The topic of "music" and "melody" and those trappings are seemingly central to the text, but at times they seem to be more of a light pulse than a central theme (Chapter 3, though provocative on its own, didn't stand out as strongly "musical," for example, and Chapter 4 did not ring much at all with musicality, even though it was a brilliant chapter.). Despite this, the work comes together as a fine exposition on topographic Orthodox Theology, capped by a thoroughly moving conclusion.