

and fruitful, surely the first step is getting to know what the other has to say on its own terms. In this respect, the work here under review is a fine contribution to lay the groundwork for just such an encounter across and between diverse traditions of the philosophy of being.

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**REGRET: A THEOLOGY** by Paul J. Griffiths, *University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2021, pp. xvi + 140, £22.99, pbk*

For some people the current Covid-19 pandemic has offered an opportunity for reflection, both in relation to the progress and handling of the disease itself and life in general, while it is important for those of us who have been able to do this to be aware that those who have suffered most because of it, the poorest of the world, have not had this luxury - survival has been their priority. What was wrong with the life I had before? What regrets do I have? How can I recompense anyone I might have wronged? How can my life be improved? These and other questions have been prompted by all that has happened in the pandemic, still far from over in the world.

Professor Paul Griffiths, born in England, has been a distinguished theologian in the USA (<http://ww25.pauljgriffiths.net>); this book is a stimulating and, as far as I can see, original examination of regret - what the author calls a 'theological grammar'. A phrase towards the end of the book sums it up: 'Someone who has no regrets is someone not fully human, and certainly someone not much formed as a Christian' (p.128); the overall argument of the book is that if regret is focused so much on remorse that it results in an over scrupulous and excessive examination of past mistakes then it can bring about no positive result; but on the other hand if regret entails genuine contrition then it can point to a better future.

The first chapter, 'The LORD's Regrets', is a fascinating study of biblical passages where God expresses regret for something he has done: the examples from the Old Testament are God's choice of Saul as King (1 *Samuel* 15), the creation of humanity before the Flood (*Genesis* 6), his original wish to destroy the people of Nineveh (*Jonah* 3) and a similar intention towards the people of Israel (*Jeremiah* 18); Griffiths then contrasts this with the different picture in relation to Jesus; here 'Regretful repentance occurs on the LORD's part at the stage of undoing: something, some state of affairs, must be undone in order for some damage to be redressed' (pp. 8-9) and the symbol of this is Luke's portrayal in particular of the Agony in Gethsemane. Like Christian liturgy, the tensions can

only be held together by using what the author calls ‘different registers’, in the same way as different types of language appear in Christian liturgy. This leads to the next chapter, ‘Faults’, where Griffiths builds on the *Felix Culpa* angle on the Fall - something bad can bring about a good result. He draws on three examples from life and history to illustrate this - a mistaken marriage which results in the blessing of children, a brilliant person who chooses a career in mathematics instead of being a concert pianist, and the *Shoah*. This last example is the most adventurous and challenging, and Griffiths acknowledges this and other ambiguities. In chapter 3, ‘Time’, the author surveys different ways in which Christianity measures time and space; one of the most interesting things about the book, which we see for the first time here, is his use of writings which are mostly outside the theological ‘canon.’ Robert Frost’s 1928 poem ‘West-Running Brook’, Paul Celan’s German poem ‘Mapesbury Road’, written two years before his suicide in 1970, and the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer’s ‘Vermeer’ (from his 1989 collection *For the Living and the Dead*). These are striking examples which make demands of the reader particularly if the authors are unfamiliar, but they are illuminating and are likely to make you want to read more of the poets cited.

In this pandemic religious leaders have written or spoken of the need communities have or will have *to lament*, particularly the loss, often in settings of despair and isolation, of loved ones; so the chapter dealing with this theme is particularly helpful. Griffiths points out that lamenting tries to do rather less than other forms of regret: ‘If you lament some state of affairs, let’s say, you shed tears for it, you tear your hair and rend your garments at it, you bewail it. Whatever it is you’re lamenting seems to you dreadful, horrible or at least unpleasant, and you respond in the ordinary ways. But you don’t necessarily wish it otherwise; you simply find it repellent, or worse’ (p. 53). Here the author draws on the *Zibaldone di pensieri* of the Italian philosopher, Giacomo Leopardi, St Augustine’s *Confessions*, and the sonnet ‘I wake and feel’, by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Looking at Hopkins’s melancholy Griffiths writes: ‘No exit is visible because the melancholic object (self-damnation, failure as a poet, incapacity to work, exile and so on) is the only visible one, and so hope vanishes and what’s left is, strictly, despair. That is lament’s characteristic and most thoroughgoing deformity, and while it is not a Christian sentiment (abandonment of hope is never a Christian sentiment), it is one to which many Christians have from time to time subject...’ (p.63). This leads to three more stages and chapters.

The first is remorse, and here Griffiths is helped by a poem of that title by Emily Dickinson, from the 1860s; and what matters here is that it is, as she puts it, ‘cureless’ - ‘it prompts nothing but suffering, provokes no imagination of a future in which its agonies become less intense, and incompatible with penitence and compunction.’ (p. 69). Many see this so much in pastoral work, meeting people who are stuck in this stage of regret, never moving out of it. As if this gloom were not enough, Griffiths

adds a short story by Henry James, 'The Beast in the Jungle': here too the grief is final and hopeless. The Catholic sacramental narrative is part of the backdrop for what needs to happen, leading to the next chapter, 'Contrition'. Moving beyond remorse is illustrated by Jane Austen's *Emma*: the heroine shows real repentance for her treatment of Hettie Bates, and this fits the Church's classic view of contrition as defined by the Council of Trent as 'sorrow at and detestation of sins committed, together with resolve not to sin further'. Griffiths goes on to look at how this affects the ways in which Christians can look at past sins of communities. In the next chapter, 'Confession', Griffiths makes one of the most interesting observations in the book; after looking at George Herbert's poem of the same name, he draws on the insights of the Cistercian abbess Angélique Arnauld (sister of the Jansenist theologian Antoine), who claimed that an introspective and detailed examination of conscience is actually egotistical and harmful; he also looks here at Wittgenstein's confessions written to friends in 1936 and 1937. For Griffiths in his final chapter, 'Penance', the resolution of the problems of regret is to be found in traditional teaching about Purgatory, both in the world to come and in our present lives. The breadth of Griffiths' vision and his imaginative use of literature show that this is a 'roller-coaster' of a book, constantly challenging and stimulating the reader.

There are some aspects of the author's method which will certainly strike some people as odd or even irritating - he has followed these and explained them in some of his other works, which is a problem if the reader has not read them. The first is that he only uses the New Vulgate version of the Bible, producing his own (very good) translations; I am not sure whether this is common practice in the USA but I have not come across it elsewhere. He also avoids any pronouns for the deity (which is common, particularly in the USA) and always refers to God as 'the LORD', a convention not followed by me in this review. I am sure the reasons given are good (in one of Griffiths's other books) but many will find it distracting.

But these problems the reader may have are well worth the effort he or she may need to make; this is an outstanding and thoughtful book.

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