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Review: The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God

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dition, however consistent or eclectic that tradition might be. Commendably, Engelsma does not mince any words when it comes to heretical teaching. One can only hope that discerning readers will weigh carefully the criticisms offered in this book, sweeping as they are, and properly identify the true miscreants in this present-day battle for the gospel of particular, sovereign grace—the gospel of justification by faith alone.

Additional space here would permit comment on other related issues, such as the role and importance of Christian nurture (including the place of evangelism in Christian schools), the necessity of church discipline (including excommunication when requisite), the question whether the covenant is conditional or unconditional (including the matter of the warnings against covenant unfaithfulness, specially as addressed in the Letter to the Hebrews), the extent and efficacy of the atonement, federal headship, the sole instrumentality of faith in soteric justification, the assurance of believers, and the perseverance of the saints. Much is at stake in our systematic formulation of the theology of the covenants. The subject of infant baptism simply opens up an array of crucial issues, as it has always done.

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The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God. By Robert Louis Wilken. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, 368 pp., $19.00.

Robert Louis Wilken, William R. Kenan Professor of the History of Christianity at the University of Virginia, has long been one of the preeminent patristic scholars in the English speaking world, and arguably the dean of American specialists in the thought of the early Christian Fathers. In *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, Wilken shows how early Christians *thought* about what they believed. He distills his vast knowledge and love for the early church, and especially its most potent and insightful thinkers, into a work that is often almost poetic in expression and deceptively accessible—its straightforward narrative form often belies the deep, rich background and knowledge Wilken brings to the task.

Wilken's expressed intention for this book, as reflected in the title, is to show, via its formative bishops and theologians, that Christianity is "inescapably ritualistic," "uncompromisingly moral," and "unapologetically intellectual." For all that is Christian, the life, the community, the high moral call, Christianity is a "way of thinking about God, about human beings, about the world and history." What Wilken wants to show in the lives of the early, formative Christian theologians is that, for Christianity, thinking is part of believing. For that reason he aims to portray the pattern of Christian thought as it took shape in the early Christian centuries.

As Wilken explores this pattern of early Christian thought, he points out early on that it was always grounded in reflection on the Church's sacred book, inspired Holy Scripture, but with reflection that was inevitably Christ-shaped and redemptocentric (the *regula fidei*). But Wilken here approaches patristic thought by a series of doctrinal foci, early bishops and/or theologians whose insightful Christian reflections on that particular question, issue, or doctrine was formative for the church as a whole. Important to the argumentation are Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Cyril of Alexandria. But of special importance at several junctures throughout are Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Maximus the Confessor. For Wilken, Augustine finally stands out as the giant among giants in

his depth of thought, his wide ranging discussion, and his elegance of argument. Thus, for example, chapters deal with how God is known ("Founded on the Cross of Christ"), worship and sacraments ("An Awesome and Unbloody Sacrifice"), the Holy Scriptures ("The Face of God for Now"), and the Trinity ("Seek His Face Always") through faithful thinking into the revealed Word by Origen, Justin, Augustine, Igratuis, Chrysostom, Clement, Irenaeus, or Cyril of Alexandria. But always so important to Wilken's depiction of such patristic reflection on Scripture, within the developing faith (*regula*) of the church, is that it be narratively seen and heard within the circumstances and relations in which the Fathers worked and lived. In this way, Wilken weaves together Christian life, thought, and community—all so integral to the early church. And, by example, Wilken is pointing out what should be the case now. The narrative form also allows Wilken to describe how Christians were seen by contemporary "Romans" who were often openly hostile to the faith.

But by means of such winsome and often glossy portrayals, Wilken is really doing more, though usually indirectly and off to the side. These substantive but almost simply presented narrative theology "bites" or *loci* are clearly formed in order to present apologetically the very best intellectual face of early Christianity. The Fathers, even (and this is difficult) Cyril of Alexandria, are made to be wholly charming in life and thought; the warts all but gone. The few that remain are turned into beauty marks. But this is, to an extent, a worthy endeavor. Those interested but outside the Christian faith may thereby be given a different way of seeing the faith and the faithful. Also, behind much of this book looms the ponderous influence of Adolf von Harnack. Long has Harnack's contention held sway that the development of early Christian thought represented the hellenization of Christianity. But Wilken says this view has outlived its usefulness and much that he presents embodies rather the Christianization of Hellenism. Given the assumption of the Spirit's effects in early Christian thought, the leading intellectual lights of the church are placed front and center, but always as men of the church and as redemptive agents of and within culture, each and all expressing by means of faithful thinking in and out of "the faith" Augustine's *credo ut intellegam* or later Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum*. Indeed, this work bears the earmarks of being Wilken's own confession of faith via his patristic heroes.

There is much to appreciate in this learned, personally and doctrinally oriented, but amazingly accessible (almost "homely" in the best sense) volume. Wilken is absolutely right about the need to make the potent Christian thinking of the Fathers a significant constructive aspect of Christian thought and life now and always. As he puts the point at the beginning, "any interpretation of the Bible that ignores its first readers is doomed to end up with a bouquet of fragments that are neither the book of the church nor the imaginative wellspring of western literature, art and music." As Wilken sets doctrines and early Christian thought within its context and the church's life, he thereby makes clear how theology is hammered out on the anvil of history. Wilken makes it a repeated point to take seriously criticisms directed against the Christian faith (e.g. Celsus, Galen), finding these to be contextually useful to the church. Not only were these criticisms answerable, Wilken maintains; he adds that Christianity repeatedly proved to be more intellectually, morally, and spiritually vibrant than its rivals. Like Wilken, all Christians should be sensitive and appreciative of their most informed critics, for these help mirror Christianity back to itself in context. To pursue this one should study Wilken's earlier volume, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*.

Yet I do have concerns about what Wilken has done here. As an ex-Lutheran convert to Roman Catholicism, Wilken reflects a low-key, usually indirect anti-Protestant point of view. He not only chooses Fathers who are of doctrinal usefulness to him and his particular intellectual point about Christian faith, but Wilken is always redacting their

thought in order to portray both the thinker/theologian and his thought well within the agenda of the desired argument. Wilken also quickly excuses, defends, or gives fresh "spin" to the wrongs or misdirection of the Fathers, whether this be Tertullian or especially Cyril of Alexandria (a Father who, to my mind, had much to learn about ethics). Often when Wilken appears to be essentially quoting a Father, he is actually engaging in Bultmann-like demythologizing of the context into modern form—probably for apologetic purposes. Gregory of Nyssa becomes Jeffersonian (minus Gregory's view of the effects of sin) and Basil his brother becomes a proto-Darwinian. While I believe Wilken is largely right about Harnack, he does underplay the effects of Hellenism, and so dualism, on early Christian thought (especially within the Alexandrian and neo-Platonic mystical traditions). Often one finds a *tertium quid*. Therefore, it must be admitted that Wilken is often too idealistic, even hagiographic, when giving narrative form to the lives and thought of these eminent early Christian leaders. They *are* heroes of the faith. They are *my* heroes. But there was significant "bathwater" ebbing around the lives of some of these extraordinary patristic "babies." This cannot be sloughed off or the narrative is to that extent falsified. These were not superhuman, despite Wilken's regular flights of praise when describing their intellectual or moral exploits.

I must recommend Robert Wilken's *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* as a work that properly brings the Fathers back in from the periphery of Christian consideration and recognizes them as real examples of moral and intellectual Christian life. Thinking is a crucial aspect of believing for Christians. We must embrace faith seeking understanding. Yet this work is difficult to categorize. Its usability as a textbook is questionable. But, again, recommended.

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A History of Apologetics. 2d edition. By Avery Cardinal Dulles. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005, 417 pp., $18.95.

The first edition of this book came out while I was midway through my doctoral program at Southwestern Seminary. I read it then, but I remember being disappointed that evangelicals were not really covered, even though we had numerous excellent apologists working in those days. I would not say that I think every flaw has been corrected in this second (my *Classical Readings in Christian Apologetics* is not even included in the bibliography), but the rather extensive updating does include a section (accurately done) on evangelical Protestants who have written apologetic works. Dulles is Roman Catholic, and the first edition was clearly from that tradition. This new edition is much broader, fairer to the various traditions, and more inclusive.

I remember thinking that the critical stance taken toward the NT was less conservative than I would have hoped. The second edition still falls to the prevailing stance of the so-called mainstream, but I was impressed with the wide-ranging scholarship that Dulles consults. I believe a better exegesis would actually strengthen his case. The NT books were written earlier than he thinks they were, but I do agree that for the most part they were written to believers rather than to unbelievers. So the NT books are strongly apologetic, in that they defend the faith and provide answers to skeptics, but they are not primarily evangelistic, that is, messages directed to unbelievers.

The early apologists often defended Christians from government policies of persecution (often based upon misrepresentations of Christian faith and practice, such as

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