

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

## Book Review

*Crossing the Threshold of Hope* by Pope John Paul II. Russian edition: *Perestupit' porog nadezhdy*, translated by Alla Kalmykova, edited by Vittorio Messori. Moscow: Istina i zhizn', 1995.

The very name of the author prepares the reader to treat his book as doctrine – authoritative for some, questionable for others and for still others an infringement of intellectual freedom. Nevertheless, this book would seem without question to be not only of interest to readers of the most varied standpoints, but also in many ways unexpected, for the author does not proclaim dogmatic truths in the manner of a pontiff of Rome, but conducts an open discussion about the Christian faith and the problems of the modern world. The book is written as an interview with Vittorio Messori, who is in fact the co-author of the book and accomplished in posing his interviewee pointed and searching questions that demand complete openness and a deeply philosophical approach. The result has every reason to be called a philosophical confession. Firstly, however, it should be explained in what sense we can talk about the present pope as a significant philosopher of our times.

Nowadays, we often understand philosophy as a purely secular field of rational knowledge called upon to reveal truths which in earlier times were exclusively the concern of theology. In its modern interpretation, philosophy appears as the opponent of theology, solving the fundamental mysteries of existence on the basis of autonomous human reason. However, this is incorrect, because philosophy does not reveal any truths whatsoever. It articulates and expresses in a rational form those truths which have their source outside the limits of philosophy itself.

Philosophy is not wisdom but the love of wisdom. This is exactly how it translates from the Greek. It addresses the experience of human existence, of history and culture, of the natural sciences and of intuitive and mystical insights (recall the 'demon' to which Socrates referred) and, lastly, the experience of revelation. The Orthodox Fathers of the Church and, in the first instance, the great Cappadocians, were profound philosophers, well able to express fundamental dogmatic truths in rational discourse and to place them in philosophical categories (drawn from the Hellenistic tradition and specially reworked). It was this philosophical work which became necessary when Christian doctrine began to be widely disseminated and diverse opinions and interpretations of the Scriptures and traditions began to arise, including various heresies that distorted the essence of Christian teachings. The philosophical expression of dogmatic truths and dogmatic theological–philosophical formulations was necessary so that it might be possible to draw a boundary between the sphere of opinion within the limits of Christian orthodoxy and heretical false doctrine. This philosophical tradition has continued in both East and West, and it is precisely to this tradition that the philosophical thought of Pope John Paul II belongs. It is deeply Christ-orientated and its tasks are to express, refine and elucidate the

truth of revelation in language accessible to human understanding. The truth serving as a starting point for this philosophy is neither science nor culture, but Jesus Christ, or, to put it in a more neutral way, the profound reality in which we live and without which we simply would not exist as people. This philosophy, like that of the Fathers and Teachers of the Church, does not feed on culture but forms it, influences it by introducing Christ-centred truth into culture. It is no coincidence that in one of his recent encyclicals, *The Light of the East* (2 May 1995), the pope calls upon all Christians (and requires Catholics) to turn to the experience of the Fathers of the Orthodox Church as the path towards comprehending Christian wisdom. In the book reviewed here, the pope speaks of the fundamental Fall of the post-Cartesian philosophy of the modern age – a philosophy which sets up as its cornerstone the cognitive capabilities of man, who has fallen away from this profound reality and has indeed lost interest in it. The main interest of modern philosophy is the study of man's cognitive faculties, but not of what ought to be the object of those faculties. The pope compares the modern intellectual elite to the crowd of Athenians who invited the Apostle Paul to the Areopagus, but who quickly lost interest in what he told them. Among the listeners were philosophers – Stoics and Epicureans – who were completely uninterested in the problem of salvation, for they thought that an individual was capable of becoming perfect by himself.

One of the main themes of the book relates to this: it is concerned with the church's struggle with the spirit of this world for the world's soul. The pope characterises the Gospels as a summons to joy, as a great affirmation of the world and mankind (p. 45). However, joy over the Good and hope for its victory do not, in his view, do away with anxiety about this Good or the fear that hope is not justified. The danger of today's world is the notion of one's own self-sufficiency (p. 84); whereas only God can give man eternal life. The Christian is always a maximalist – he is not content with the good things which the world can give him. In this sense Christians are 'not of this world' (p. 85). Post-Enlightenment thought does not acknowledge the reality of sin. The church has to reveal the sins of the world without judging sinners, who need salvation and the help of the church. The pope maintains that '... in revealing sin, we create the conditions for salvation', which comes through the realisation of one's own sinfulness (p. 86). He emphasises that Christianity has always been open to the world (p. 105). New evangelism must answer the new challenges that the modern world throws up for the church's mission.

Sometimes you hear the view that the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65 was a victory for church 'innovators' but that now, after the succession of two 'progressive' popes – John XXII and Paul VI – the conservative Pope John Paul II is trying to put a brake on the Council's decisions and channel them along the line of conservative tradition. With this book, John Paul II shows that it is not possible to characterise the essence of the Christian Church simply as either 'conservative' or 'innovatory'. Conservatism is the attempt at any cost to give fossilised traditional forms precedence over living content; but in fact these traditional forms are usually not all that ancient – for example, the alliance of church structures with post-medieval absolute monarchies. What is involved here is a renunciation of spiritual influence on the modern, fast-changing world. (There is a very interesting article on this subject by Józef Tischner in *Kontinent* no. 83 called 'Ob istokakh integrizma' ('The Sources of Integrisim')). Meanwhile the 'innovation' so highly valued in liberal circles (especially non-church circles) is an inept effort to adapt church practice to what is generally considered acceptable in modern culture, that is, to accept moral relativism and, basically, to follow the spirit of this world, forgetting that 'mankind was created in

order to become the priest, prophet and king of all Creation' (p. 41). Herein lies the dignity and duty of every Christian. The church is entrusted not only to the priesthood but also to all who have been baptised, although all are called to carry out their own individual tasks in their own place (p. 7).

When speaking of the modern world's perception of the church's teaching, the pope draws special attention to the danger of moral relativism (p. 215) and to the fact that questions of moral freedom are concerned in the end with the truth about human beings (p. 216). The pope speaks directly to irresponsible 'innovators' in phrases such as the following: 'When true doctrine is unpopular, easy popularity should not be sought.'

The church can be neither progressive nor conservative, but must respond to the challenges of the modern world while constantly turning to the original sources of Christian belief.

The author explains that the most important thing in a pope is not special virtue as pontiff but his service, expressed in St Gregory the Great's formulation 'servant of the servants of God'. The pope shares this service with the bishops, priests and all believers. John Paul II cites the words of St Augustine: 'a Christian with you, a bishop for you'. It is this 'a Christian with you' which is the most important element in the explanation of the mystery of papal service, directed as it is to all Christians and all people of good will. It expresses the pope's understanding of the unity of all Christians and the community of all mankind. He writes that man is responsible for his struggle with God (p. 171). The consequence of this confrontation is that modern civilisation has created structures based on force, and a gulf between rich and poor, and has proved incapable of resolving social and national conflicts. The main question which will decide the fate of mankind is: 'Will man yield to the love of God or to the Prince of Darkness?' (p. 172).

The book deals with the responsibility of mankind, a subject which is closely linked with the problem of spiritual unity and hence with the problem of inter-religious relations, to which the pope gives serious attention. He points out important monotheistic elements in primitive religions (including the beliefs of the Australian aborigines), which Christian missionaries have to take into account. He sees the problem for ecumenism not as the unifying of denominations, but as the discovery of what is common to the world's confessions in all their diversity. The problem of Christian unity takes a special place here, based as it is on a general recognition that the church is the Body of Christ. The pope writes that in Christ the church is catholic and conciliar, but that it is divided over a difference in understanding of the Good News. Delineating the rift between Catholics and Orthodox, he emphasises that it is not all that deep, but that it is perceived more as an obstacle of a psychological and historical nature. The pope notes increasing efforts to achieve unity (p. 187), but sees in the existing divisions not only the fruit of sin but the revelation of richness (p. 193), and this leads him to remark that the human race must attain unity through plurality: here he sees the main path for ecumenical dialogue (p. 193). Closely linked with this is his idea that 'the supernational unity of the Catholic Church remains a great strength' (p. 211). This is an experience which the Catholic Church can bring to the common treasury of Christianity. The encyclical *Ut unum sint* (25 May 1995) is dedicated to questions of Christian unity.

The author does not suggest a concrete plan of action for the church on Earth, nor does he suggest a plan for the unity of Christian churches. He writes about hope. Discussing the pope's book, Archimandrite Fr Iosif Pustoutov aptly remarked: 'The strength of the Holy Spirit is active in man when, in the words of the Apostle Paul,

we “are not ashamed of hope”.’ The fate of the world and the church will not be decided by plans of action, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. It should not be forgotten, however, that ‘Christianity is a religion of the activity of God and man’ (p. 156). Man’s activity needs hope, so that man does not lose his way in the world and does not just float in it like a piece of wood in a stream.

The first words which the present pope uttered before the people on St Peter’s Square were those of Jesus, ‘do not be afraid’. It seemed to me at the time that this was an appeal not to be afraid of the terrors and difficulties of this world, to confront boldly the dangers which threaten in a harsh world. However, this new book reveals a profounder meaning in the pope’s challenge. The author writes that we must not be afraid of the truth about ourselves or of recognising ourselves as Christians (p. 29). The pope calls upon us not to be afraid of the mysteries of God or of witnessing to the value of the individual from conception to death (p. 35). Jesus addressed his challenge ‘do not be afraid’ to the Apostle Peter, who was afraid of the fate of Jesus the man, and afraid that he himself would not measure up to the load placed upon his shoulders. The pope calls upon us not to be afraid, not of the burdens and dangers of this world, but of the presence of God and of acting as his servants. We are not to be afraid when the world does not comprehend this service; we are not to be afraid of acting in a manner contrary to what the world demands of us. To overcome this fear, which is natural for mankind – this is the meaning of ‘crossing the threshold of hope’.

YULI SHREIDER

(Translated from the Russian by Geraldine Fagan)