

The Difference Nothing Makes: Creation, Christ, Contemplation. By Brian Robinette. South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2023. Pp. xviii + 318. \$48 (hb); \$37.99 (eb).

With wonderfully lucid prose and powerful conceptual granularity, Robinette's second installment (see his also excellent antecedent, *Grammars of Resurrection*) introduces the reader to the world of contemplative practice, a world illuminated by the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The title of the book hardly captures the vast theological and philosophical territory R. traverses in expert manner. Like previous volumes and articles emanating from his clever pen, this monograph features a sustained retrieval of René Girard, which may well constitute the conceptual heart of the work. Other canonical heroes reappear at regular intervals: towering figures such as Karl Rahner, contemplatives like Thomas Merton, and finally, fugitive contemporary theological voices like Tomáš Halík and Sergei Bulgakov in the later chapters on the purgative function of the secular and atheism.

How do creation, contemplation, and Christology intertwine? A fascinating monograph which systematicians, historians of religion, philosophers, and ethicists can read to their delight, R.'s *The Difference Nothing Makes* contends that the three foci in the subtitle of the book interconnect on the basis of mimetic theory. Focusing chiefly on a theological retrieval of Girard's work (on rivalry, scapegoating, and retaliation), R. guides the reader on a rich journey through the contemplative tradition in Christian theology, one that prioritizes the (life-giving) force of virtues that oppose mimetic rivalry: love, forgiveness, and peacemaking, and the "letting-go" of the urge to exact revenge (emotional, physical, monetary, etc.).

Part I focuses on creation from nothing, both its history as a doctrine and its spiritual cash value: the contemplative joy expressed about our being created from nothing, and, concomitantly, our utter contingency as a creature. This posture rests on an ontology which frees us to live happily within the parameters of finitude—that is, within the limits of our native state of becoming.

Part II examines beautifully the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth from a Girardian perspective. Our coming from nothing, our being dispossessed from the idea of a stable and substantial self, corresponds to a life in which we exact nothing from the other. We open up a life of dispossession, R. consistently suggests in a poetic manner, rooted in loving and giving, not in tactics of revenge and resentment; it is the death and resurrection of Jesus that highlights this path of forgiveness and peace.

Part III appreciates the late modern pluralism in which prayer and non-rivalrous contemplation dwell. Atheism is no enemy but rather a conversation partner. Such a dialogue leads to greater self-awareness on the part of the Christian contemplative. Creation, in all three parts, consists not of monism or of dualism, but of an incarnational between like "panentheism," where each soul can return to a love of creation because God is always already present in all things, without implying that God is absorbed in all things (229ff.).

An affirmation about contemplation in R. is in order. I hope readers will enjoy as much as I did the material on contemplation. Ever the clear guide and motivational

teacher, R. asks us to return to the lived or subjective dynamics of creation and the ministry of Christ (who as a divine person is “concentrated creation”); we need not examine creation as an abstract idea or doctrine (which it typically is cast as). Part II, entitled “Christ as Concentrated Creation,” contains a final subsection that invokes the conceptual soil in which the mercy that combats mimetic rivalry can grow: contemplative letting go of the desire to possess others or creation itself.

The *Difference Nothing Makes* is a work of spiritual enrichment and intellectual depth that I recommend heartily to academics and spiritual seekers alike, as well as to any reader interested in poetic prose. One final point I wish to adduce here: it is one of slight contention, one based on a rather abstruse technical point; such a reaction on my part arises only out of my deep respect for R.’s mind and heart in all matters theological and philosophical (in all matters, frankly).

“We-centricity” or our being-we-centric is a phrase that makes itself felt throughout the book; it is one that best captures our selfhood according to R. This insight is profound. We are not isolated monads. We are not pure egos. We are not self-subsisting or self-positing I’s. We are not self-legislating Cartesian *cogitos*.

Girard’s work on the triangularity of desire makes the anthropology of we-centricity all the more evident. Each of us, in our unique context, copies the other, imitates the other, learns from the other. We learn language and social conventions via the power of mimetic desire. An infant learns how to smile, laugh, and speak in local idioms only in relationship with others who model those embodied mannerisms, facial expressions, and linguistic patterns. And yet, I wonder, however briefly and suggestively, if R. could say even more about the transcendental structure of we-centricity. Perhaps there is no such thing as individuality? Perhaps Girard or R. wants to eliminate individuality?

I would advance the philosophical claim that we are distinct egos who have ownership over our lives, which makes possible conflict and indeed love, but how are we distinct individuals if the “we” takes precedence? If we do not kill the ego, then perhaps we can propose a paradigm of the self that is enactive—where the ego emerges authentically as itself as a “particular self” in relationship with others and the world.

Such a technical and pernickety point aside, the *Difference Nothing Makes* is a major achievement in the oeuvre of one of contemporary theology’s most profound voices writing today. R.’s work should be celebrated and it should provoke debate concerning not only the phenomenological structure of the self, but also: (i) the nature of Christ’s atonement, (ii) the lived dynamics of creation, (iii) the meaning of love, (iv) the practice of detachment and contemplation, and finally but not least, (v) the enduring significance of Christian spirituality in an increasingly post-Christian West.

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