

Haunted by Christ

By Rowan Williams

London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2018

This is an admirable compilation of 15 chapters, each chapter devoted to an individual author. What the authors share in common is a search, implicit or explicit, for what the book's title terms, Christ. They live, in a positive or negative way, under the shadow of the influence of Christian tradition and teaching, and their individual oeuvre can be seen through from a theological perspective. Williams argues that literature is a meta or soft approach to understanding religious questions, and in an age of scepticism towards established religion such a "backdoor" approach can refresh the possibility of faith in modern society. Williams argues for literature in a similar way we might argue for semiotics, as a means to comprehend traditions that in their own terms might alienate or seem exclusive.

It must be said that this book is well written and readable. For any literary students, within and outside of the academy (and there are plenty of the latter), this book would appeal in its reasoned style that provides close exegesis to works under study - it lets the book, and their author, speak. It does not bracket selected authors according to christian apologetic frames, but like any semiotic approach seeks a dispassionate perspective that gives respect and seriousness to the subject of religion as it permeates literary texts.

Some of these authors - such as Gerard Manly Hopkins or C. S. Lewis - are direct exponents of their belief. Their writings belong in the vast ecclesiastical canon of hymns, poetry and prayers that embellish and assist worship and devotion over the centuries. Others, such as Emily Dickinson, explore spiritual dimensions of experience outside of established tradition. Yet others, like Dostoevsky, use literary form such as the novel to locate extended discourse about theology, within lived experience of his characters. Catholic writers, like Graham Green and T.S. Eliot, join an iconic figure like W.H.Auden, to use creative expression to explore theological questions with a fresh fervour and meaning.

Literature does not, finally, provide a metalanguage for convenient, auxiliary understanding of faith. There is no common language or core concepts unifying a plethora of material. The authors are very diverse in their approaches - they offer not so much a convenient reprise of religion as an alternative regime of values and narrative, that is demanding and challenging both in their own right and also in their capacity to represent religion. That is literature can be as “thick” and cryptic in its formulations as any religious practice, often moreso.

The book’s title is sourced, with an existing meaning of living in the source of the influence and tradition of Christ and christian teaching. I am not sure how an existential writer like Beckett qualifies in that regard. “Haunted by God” could certainly apply, starting with the pun of his most famous play. But christianity is based on explicit historical events - I am not sure how can be inferred about someone who has left the faith or chosen to be indifferent to it.

This book invites a larger study - “Christianity and Literature” would reach out to literary texts within ecclesiastical practice as well as independent creations. It is refreshing, as Williams argues, to have a less ecclesiastical approach, to examine religion without presuming affiliation or belief. On the other hand, the ecumenical challenge remains - why limit any literary, or semiotic study, to one main tradition. If the approach aims to be inclusive and inquiring, why not include non christian authors and faiths? The title “Haunted by God” would apply with even more resonance.

Geoffrey Sykes