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BOOK PROFILE: *HOLINESS, SPEECH AND SILENCE*

A profile of Nicholas Lash's *Holiness, Speech and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God*. Ashgate Publishing, 2004. 98 pp. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 0-7546-5039-1.

IN THIS SHORT BOOK, which first saw the light of day as a series of lectures given in 2002 and 2004, the distinguished theologian Nicholas Lash, professor of divinity at Cambridge University, illuminates several features of contemporary culture by means of bringing them into proximity with the Christian doctrine of God. These features include globalization and the imperial suspicion of all grand or master narratives that would propose to make sense of it all, the problem of language and difficulties attendant upon cross-cultural conversation, and the dual threat of darkness and solitude that press upon life as a threat. This, however, is no ordinary academic exposition, filled with jargon and technical minutiae designed, at best, to impress but more likely deter the non-specialist from venturing into its pages. Rather, it is an imminently accessible tract that gently brings the truth of God as Spirit, Word, and Father to bear on the contemporary context in a manner that reveals Jesus Christ as the source of our hope that we meet God as our fulfillment.

The first chapter, on the intriguing topic of what God looks like, is in fact a lamentation or chastisement of sorts. It is a lamentation of the comprehensive ignorance of Christianity in the West that is aided and abetted by the number of devout Christians who reflect little or no understanding of the faith and simultaneously exhibit a complete lack of interest in or care for the truth of Christianity. The concomitant result of this development is the gradual shift in the referent "god." Whereas once it marked a relationship characterized as worship; now it is merely a descriptive or explanatory term that delineates a class or kind of being, with which one may or may not have any kind of relation. How does this bear on the question, what does God look like? When looking for God, we no longer look for an occurrence or event. Such a quest is no longer associated with what we do or undergo. Instead, we look for an (inert) thing or object that does not necessarily entail a claim on or relationship with us. God is something we observe instead of worship.

The second chapter takes up globalization under the aegis of the Spirit's holiness. Lash argues that the recognition that we are indeed one world, one people, depends on the fostering of a global imagination to which Christianity can contribute. Here Lash challenges us to recall that the Spirit's work of holiness was not first and foremost a moral category, but a matter of call. The Spirit calls a particular people who announce and dramatize the possibility and reality of a common peoplehood, and an exceptionless communion of the whole of humankind. To advance such a claim, Lash realizes, is to champion a grand narrative in an age when such narratives have fallen under suspicion as imperialistic and totalitarian. Lash counters this suspicion with the suggestion that the character of God (and so, too, of God's called people) as forgiving, inexhaustible generosity, and limitless donation makes possible a grand narrative that does not conquer others but instead is enriched and deepened through engagement with those who tell a different story.

The third chapter considers the problem of conversation among this one people spread across the globe. If the second chapter suggests that God looks like the Spirit calling people together, this chapter considers God as the Word that is the condition of possibility for every true word, for all serious speech, for genuine conversation. In a world that has forgotten the source of all words in the Word, words degenerate into either weapons or frivolous chatter. But all is not lost, for the Word continues to make serious speech, the difficult and timely work of communication, possible. Born in response to the Word, serious speech (of which contemplative prayer is the paradigm) occurs as a kind of covenant where the speaker is responsible for what she says and is obligated to listen to the interlocutor.

The fourth chapter takes up the question of silence, the silence that swallows us in the face of the darkness of the world's evil and the silence that literally envelops us as we consider the extent of the cosmos and our rather obscure place in it. Here God looks like the Father who creates us in absolute dependency, contingency, and peace. Thus the dependency and contingency that the darkness distorts into the threat of violence are in fact the form that the gift of relation to the Father takes. What the darkness of sin construes as and deforms into bondage to another (and so we misconstrue freedom as separation) is our God-given freedom to be in relation to God and one another. Here Lash acknowledges that his work approaches its limit, that he approaches the point where god-talk must cease lest it fall into explanation and description (see chapter one). So he leaves us with an exhortation to the silence that is attentiveness to God and to one another. In particular, he calls the church to shake off its indifference and again become a school of wisdom, of silence and attentiveness, where we help one another acquire the courage to be still and keep our eyes open in the dark.

With this book, Lash once again shows himself to be an astute interpreter of contemporary culture and a profound communicator of the Christian faith.

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