

Nonna Verna Harrison, *God's Many-Splendored Image: Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010. Pp. 207. Retail Price: \$15.00

It is always difficult to review a book with many strengths. The writer's masterful display of wisdom, charity, and justice makes this one such book. Sr. Nonna's most recent work is the fruit of an experienced Patristics scholar who can deliver an emotionally compelling text. In its pages the reader will be confronted with the synergy of the profoundest mystical theology of the Eastern Christian Church and the earthiest issues of the world today. To those who might be wearied by the prevalently negative Augustinian view of the post-lapsarian human person, this text will be a positive respite.

Sr. Nonna presents with simplicity, precision, and depth many characteristics the Eastern fathers and mothers considered to be fundamental existential structures of the human being, especially as created *ad imaginem Dei*. The book allots one chapter to different aspects that constitute human personhood. Freedom comes first, followed by a consideration of God and Christ in relation to humanity. Spiritual perception, virtues and humility, royal dignity, and embodiment come afterward, ever drawing a more complex picture of humankind. Following, she covers humanity's belonging in the created world, our proclivity for arts and sciences, and finally our existential preference for community. These different aspects she brings to bear on contemporary pressing affairs.

The first chapter deals in human freedom, which will be a precondition for the rest of the work. She discusses how freedom is constitutive of humankind: "Freedom is . . . so central to who we are as human beings, that the fourth-century Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa considered it an important facet of the divine image that defines us as human" (13). There is good reason Sr. Nonna began the book with human freedom. Its implications are far-reaching and will spill over into the subsequent sections of the book. It is striking to learn how fervently some Christians of

the fourth century denounced slavery as an affront against God's own person. Among the many fathers and mothers she cites, Gregory of Nyssa is well-known for attaching singular freedom to humankind and condemning slavery for the evil it is. At the same time, Sr. Nonna allows that freedom causes many ills in the world.

In this first chapter she elucidates precisely how the Eastern fathers understood human freedom to collaborate with God—the divine synergy as it is called. This chapter, and its thoughtful consideration of human ontology, stands in stark opposition to later Western pessimistic additions and modifications, especially Augustine's. It evidences that human freedom and God's sovereignty are not at odds, nor is God's grace biased. She gives an example from Origen's writings which exemplifies this through sailors using the natural forces to navigate. In her words: "The sailors were thankful to God for the collaboration of wind, weather, and stars on their journey . . . . Though the contribution of their free choice and work was small in comparison to the natural forces, it was essential" (27). Freedom and its ethical implications reverberate throughout the rest of the book.

The second, third, and fourth chapters further the implications of the first chapter and deal concretely with other aspects of the human person, as delineated above. These characteristics come to an apex in the fifth chapter. Sr. Nonna treats of "royal dignity" as related to freedom vis-à-vis the human trafficking industry today. Through a careful study of sources, statistics, and experts, the author denounces the prevalence of slavery—whether sexual or of a different sort—in the present world, and discloses the inherently evil nature of this practice as an attempt against the divine image in humankind. She considers the elevated status God accorded humankind, drawing from the fact of the Incarnation (from chapter two) and our conformity to the divine. In many ways this section is a distress call that appeals to commonly-shared, good

human nature and attempts to stir to action without being sensational or pedantic. It also accomplishes a well-executed defense of women's dignity and corrects—as much as possible—the erred notion that all church fathers were sexist.

The fifth chapter leads into the sixth with sublime beauty by centering on human embodiment. Against the mistaken historical tradition that has charged all of Christianity with a distaste for the material, this chapter illumines the Patristic period's due regard for this cosmos. The worth of the body takes the center stage, since the body can be an aide for the human person's salvation, as well as a vinculum between the spiritual realities above us and the material realities around us. She concludes: "The body together with the soul and mind . . . can make essential contributions to the human person's divine likeness" (110–111). These will be flushed out in the following sections, as she considers how these labor jointly in creative ways that manifest the divine likeness.

Sr. Nonna continues in chapter eight to address the role of technology and to assert that there is nothing wrong with technology in and of itself. In fact, it can be good and an outworking of the divine image. This might come across as a peculiar claim these days, but it evidences the balance the writer strives for, with particular reference to the way humankind uses its freedom. For the arts, as well as the sciences, are manifestations of our divine image, being creators and organizers like God. At the same time she cautions that the implications for the great power we were given, as created in the image of God, will have repercussions on the environment and the universe. Here emerge again the implications of human freedom. How well we bear out our divine likeness will determine whether we light an entire city with an H-bomb or with light bulbs. Through the arts we can manifest truths that would have no other means of manifestation, such as divine images: *icons*. These are proper and fitting human enterprises that are meaningful

both in this world and for the world that is to come. Far from being fruitless laboring against the backdrop of the *eschaton*, Sr. Nonna asserts that these practices are contributions to the world's eschatological renewal *today*.

To conclude, this book is simply excellent due to its capacity to bring into dialogue ancient wisdom with today's anxieties. The singular honor of having the foreword written by Sr. Nonna's own professor and world-renown Patristics scholar, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, says much about the caliber of this work. The very style of this book is coherent with its central claims. In its carefully-crafted pages horror leads to beauty, desperation to hope, apathy to engagement, and age-long wisdom to conviction. I cannot think of a timelier book that engages as many diverse topics with such scholarly acumen, intellectual coherence, and religious zeal. The views expressed in this work are precisely what postmodern society requires—a reminder that we need look no farther than ourselves to find a manifestation of God; when we are truly human we are already being divine. A subtle difficulty in this book is the blurring of the line between ethics and theological anthropology. Perhaps this is altogether fitting as it seems the one cannot be considered without regard to the other. I have little doubt this work will soon be a theological-anthropological classic and a reference book for many students, professors, and clergy. Every theological library would do well in owning a copy.

Luis Joshua Salés<sup>1</sup>  
Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

---

<sup>1</sup> Luis Joshua Salés is an Eastern Orthodox student in the MTS program at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. He received his Bachelor degrees in English Writing and Political Science in May, 2010 from Wheaton College (Illinois), where he also completed a Master's degree in Historical and Systematic Theology in December, 2010 with a focus on Patristics.