

*Theological Interpretation of Culture in Post-Communist Context:
Central and Eastern European Search for Roots*
Ivana Noble

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SUMMARY

Under the dictatorial regimes of Communist Europe, the Church suffered violent persecution that attempted to suppress its efforts at answering the pressing existential issues of the day. During the same period, artists, in their own unique languages and genres, took up the mantle of dissidence, seeking to find expressions to their repressed inner searches for meaning. Despite these atrocities, aspects of both answers remain embedded within Central and Eastern European culture. Ivana Noble seeks to connect these cultural texts with theological discourse in a search for roots and identity within the desert of meaninglessness.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Unter den diktatorischen Regimen des kommunistischen Europa litt die Kirche unter heftiger Verfolgung. Diese hatte zum Ziel, die Bemühungen der Kirche zu unterdrücken, Antworten auf die dringlichen existentiellen Fragen der Zeit zu geben. Zur gleichen Zeit hüllten sich Künstler mit ihren jeweiligen Sprachen und Genres in den Mantel der Dissidenten und suchten dabei, ihrer unterdrückten inneren Suche nach Sinn Ausdruck zu verleihen. Trotz dieser Gewaltanwendung haben sich Aspekte beider Antwortbereiche nachhaltig in die zentral- und osteuropäische Kultur eingepägt. Ivana Noble bemüht sich darum, diese kulturellen Texte in Beziehung zu bringen zum theologischen Diskurs, um inmitten einer Wüste von Sinnlosigkeit Wurzeln und Identität auszumachen.

RÉSUMÉ

Sous les régimes dictatoriaux de l'Europe communiste, l'Église a souffert de violentes persécutions visant à supprimer ses efforts pour répondre aux grands problèmes existentiels du moment. Au cours de la même époque, des artistes ont revêtu le manteau de la dissidence, avec leur propre langage et leur style unique, pour trouver des moyens d'expression pour leur quête intérieure de sens, qui se trouvait réprimée. Malgré les atrocités répressives, certains aspects de ces deux courants demeurent ancrés dans la culture de l'Europe centrale et orientale. Ivana Noble cherche à établir des liens entre ces textes culturels et le discours théologique, en quête de racines et d'identité dans le désert où le sens fait défaut.

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Ivana Noble's *Theological Interpretation of Culture in a Post-Communist Context* gives voice to previously dissident discourses found in several culture texts of Central and Eastern Europe from the interregnum war period of the twentieth century to the present. These literary, musical and cinematic expressions find resonance with

theological discourse because both 'in their "ultimate concern" are related to "Ultimate Reality"', laying the foundation for a 'genuinely reciprocal dialogue between theology and culture' (6). Such dialogue, Noble hopes, will enable us to 'reopen lost access to the symbolic worlds of meaning...in which communication between our cultural and theological belonging is renewed' (9).

Justin Martyr's notion of *logos spermatikos* and its further association with the *logos Christos* provide Noble with a theological basis for noting the positive aspects of culture in its plurality of forms and its ability to open participants to new realities beyond themselves. Yet, culture has a dark side as well when it becomes idolatrous and self-referential, making itself the measure of all things. To navigate between the iconic and idolatrous, Noble leans heavily on Paul Tillich's methodology of correlation where theology is the basis of culture while culture provides new avenues of expression for theology. Building upon Tillich's methodology, she considers the Church (i.e., the location of religious symbols and their theological expressions) and culture to be intertwined such that one assists in interpreting the other since she assumes both to be distinct manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

Noble begins, then, with cultural artefacts and interprets them theologically, exploring images of the world, memory, and the meaning of ultimate fulfilment. In Part 1, she presents various images of the world articulated by Karel Čapek, a leading Czech author, and Bashevis Singer, a Polish-American Jewish author and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature. Both address the atrocities brought about by the Nazi and Communist regimes, seeing the world as imperilled but also as a place where humans can flourish. To communicate these themes, Čapek uses the metaphors of the world as factory, garden and an open horizon while Singer wrestles with art after Auschwitz by vividly telling the stories of a begotten world 'lived in cities and villages, in poverty and persecution, and imbued with sincere piety and rites combined with blind faith and superstition' (16). Noble conceptually expands upon these themes, understanding the world as both gift and task such that there is a dialogical relationship between God and the world by drawing upon primarily patristic sources and the Orthodox tradition.

In Part 2, Noble tackles the issue of memory and remembering of painful events and how these memories can become redemptive elements in a new future. Vladimir Vysotsky, a suppressed Russian artist whose works shaped the counter cultural movements in Communist societies, and Jaromír Nohavica, the ever-popular Czech folk musician and distant pupil of Vysotsky who did the same, are her case studies. Vysotsky's and Nohavica's music recall the horrors and brutality of a totalitarian culture where conflicts are not reconciled and a guiding sense of a purposeful life is, at best, illusive. Although Vysotsky embraces the tragic, Nohavica, in his post-Communist music, sees reason for hope and heal-

ing in rebuilding one's world. Nevertheless, both offer sharp criticisms of an omnipotent and omnipresent God who surely was 'drunk with cheap Balkan liqueur' while people suffered these cruelties (110). In light of these painful memories, Noble offers an alternative theological trajectory to the common understanding of a providential God by abdicating theologies that glorify Christ as a victim and emphasizing the reciprocity between God and humanity. Christ redeems us, then, *with* our painful memories as they rest in the eschatological hope and open futures of both God and creation.

Part 3 examines the notion of ultimate fulfilment as that which 'invites and transcends our imagination of the future' in an effort to determine its impact on human life (143). Through various cinematic pieces, Noble begins by comparing István Szabó's *Mephisto* and Vladimir Michálek's *Forgotten Light* to discern why someone pursues self-fulfilment or gives of themselves. She then considers how love may be the gift given in Krzysztof Kieślowski's trilogy *Three Colours*. In the end, she concludes that a conversion toward love is only possible through relationships as one embraces their roots rather than exchanging them for another. Theologically speaking, Noble connects the gift of love with the Holy Spirit as Giver, noting that this love is non-sacrificial as it renews all of creation's communion with God. Yet, the Holy Spirit's *kenosis* (i.e., self-giving) is insufficient. What is needed for deep fulfilment, for the restoration of the human self, is a conscious relationship to God where one's 'yes' to God encounters and overcomes one's 'no'.

Noble's work is a cultural and theological gem that seeks to address the existential questions inherent in all cultures, particularly though in Central and Eastern Europe. Her nuanced understanding of secularisation is an apt reminder to readers that secularisation is not a univocal concept but is shaped by varying cultural forces that give it a measure of elasticity. Although she is right to link a positive view of culture to Justin Martyr's notion of *logos spermatikos*, a thicker description, in my estimation, can be given through a robust understanding of common grace and the cultural mandate elucidated in Richard Mouw's *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Eerdmans, 2001).

Her assumption that the Holy Spirit is operative in both the culture and the Church begs for clarification, leaving readers to wonder what the mission of the Spirit is in relationship to the other persons of the Trinity. This lack of development is evidenced by the ambiguous criteria for adjudicating between icon and idol and perhaps her understanding of doctrine as primarily descriptive rather than directive. Consequently, human freedom constrains God's freedom. Yet, such efforts to bolster human responsibility turn on a category mistake, entangling God's identity with his creation thereby blurring the Creator-creature distinction. In doing so, God is rendered less worthy of worship since humanity no longer depends solely on the God revealed in Christ by the Spirit to overcome the evil of this world.

Although readers may disagree with some of Noble's doctrinal adjustments (e.g., God, atonement, love, etc.) in order to address her culture, her efforts to provide a theological interpretation of culture are a step in the right direction as she attempts to bridge two horizons of meaning – theology and culture – that are constructed from within various frameworks. Moreover, her attentive ear to culture's critique of inauthentic expressions of faith, hope and love should cause us all to pause and examine our own efforts in the Spirit to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Christ. Noble's book should gain a wide hearing, particularly among those who are interested in *doing* theology and not simply talking about it.

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Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Graeco-Roman World

Kevin Osterloh and Gregg Gardner (eds.)

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Diese Sammlung von Aufsätzen erforscht, welche Rolle ein kollektives Gedächtnis und eine gemeinschaftliche Geschichte gespielt haben, und zwar in den Bereichen Identitätsbildung, politische Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, soziale Beziehungen, künstlerische Ausdrucksformen, religiöse Glaubensformen und ihre Praxis und was die Entstehung beglaubigter Sammlungen von Familien- und Volkstraditionen anbelangt. Es geht dabei um Juden, Christen und ihre heidnischen Nachbarn in der antiken Welt des Mittelmeers und des Vorderen Orients in der späten Antike beginnend mit dem 3. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis ins 7. Jahrhundert n. Chr. Kurz gesagt: Wie haben die Menschen in der Antike ihre eigene Vergangenheit gesehen und mit welcher Zielsetzung? Der Band entstand bei einem Kolloquium zum Thema *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World* [Antike in der Antike: Jüdische und Christliche Vergangenheit in der Griechisch-Römischen Welt] an der Universität in Princeton im Januar 2006.

SUMMARY

This collection of essays seeks to explore how collective memory and group history played a role in identity formation, political propaganda, social relations, artistic expressions, religious beliefs and practice and the establishment of official corpora of ancestral traditions for Jews, Christians and their pagan neighbours in the ancient Mediterranean World and the Near East in late antiquity from the third century BC to the seventh century AD. In short, how did people in antiquity view their own past and for what purposes?

RÉSUMÉ

Cette collection d'essais cherche à explorer comment la