

ROBERT SOKOLOWSKI, *Christian Faith and Human Understanding. Studies on the Eucharist, Trinity, and the Human Person*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 2006, pp. xiii + 317.

THIS is a collection of nineteen essays, produced over the past twenty years, in which the acclaimed American philosopher Robert Sokolowski applies his distinctive brand of phenomenology to a wide range of Christian themes. Each essay is a further contribution to the “theology of disclosure” that Fr. Sokolowski brought onto the scene in his brilliant study *The God of Faith and Reason* (1982). Each is also a philosophical, theological, and even literary gem in its own right, and together they form an excellent introduction to his thought.

To some readers the word “phenomenology” may conjure up something either impenetrably arcane or irredeemably subjectivist, or both, and they may be frightened off. That would be a pity. Sokolowski’s phenomenology is emphatically neither. It is simply

«a form of philosophy that pays close attention to the way things appear. It insists that different kinds of things offer us different patterns and structures of appearance. It also claims that one of the major tasks in philosophy is to describe these patterns and structures, to describe the different ways in which things manifest themselves. Appearances are part of the being of things; they are not merely subjective impressions [T]here is ... a philosophical intelligibility in the way things manifest themselves, in the way they come to light, and phenomenology attempts to bring out this intelligibility of disclosure.» (p. 76)

Notice how effortless the reading is. It is all like that.

«Phenomenology is often interpreted as being highly subjectivist and relativistic, as claiming that we never get to the reality of things but remain *only* with appearances, and that these appearances are merely the things *seem* to us, not the way they are in themselves. Some writers in this movement may accept this interpretation, but ... I would claim that we can interpret phenomenology in such a way that it can be used to counteract the subjectivism and relativism of much of modern thought ... [and] can revive the kind of realism that marked ancient and medieval philosophy.» (pp. 76-77)

At least part of what enables Sokolowski to interpret phenomenology in this way, as letting the appearances of things emerge from and merge into their being, is surely the extent to which he takes it to be concerned with displaying *distinctions*. «Things are manifested when they are distinguished from things that are like them, from things that provide their context» (p. 115). This is indeed in continuity with the tradition of realism. St Thomas in fact says that to know a thing’s difference from other things is to know what it is in itself, in its own being – its “quiddity and nature” (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 87, a. 1). But phenomenology offers its own contribution, by rigorously articulating the distinctions in the very ways in which the differences of different things are by nature apt to come to light (and to hide).

The “theology of disclosure”, then,

«tries to reflect on the way the things of our Christian faith come to light, how they are manifested to us. It tries to reflect on the appearance of Christian things. It does not, however,

take these appearances to be merely subjective or psychological or even just historical. It attempts to get to essential structures of disclosure.» (p. 114)

So this phenomenology of Christianity is very far from a “philosophy of religion”, as that is usually understood. It does not focus one-sidedly on the subjective dispositions of the worshiper or the believer; it is not “anthropological” (see p. 115, n. 4). The focus is chiefly on the *objects* of worship and belief, those specifying *this* worship and *this* belief, «who and what is believed» (p. 3). And it is all about distinctions.

«A simple and intuitive way of describing the theology of disclosure is to say that it tries to show how Christian things are distinguished from the natural things that provide their context. Most fundamentally, the theology of disclosure would attempt to show how the God revealed in Christian faith is to be distinguished from the divinities that pagan culture and thinking arrived at. It would try to show how faith, hope and charity are to be distinguished from the natural virtues of temperance, courage, justice, prudence, and friendship; it would show that they are a different kind of virtue. The theology of disclosure would try to show how the sacraments are to be distinguished from natural religious celebrations.» (p. 115)

(Pardon so much quoting, but why only praise the writing and not show it to you?)

The essays are arranged under four heads: “Faith and Reason”; “The Eucharist and the Holy Trinity”; “The Human Person”; “Faith and Practical Reasoning”. The main theme in the first group, and really the unifying motif of the whole collection, is what Sokolowski takes to be the primary truth of the theology of disclosure. He calls it “the Christian distinction”. It is both a distinction that Christianity teaches, and a teaching that distinguishes Christianity. It is the distinction between God and the world. Christianity declares the world to be freely created. The creator is not a part of it, nor indeed of anything. He «could be, in undiminished goodness and greatness, even if everything were not» (p. 41).

Sokolowski demonstrates how, by declaring this, Christianity distinguishes itself radically from the pagan religions, which either make the divine only the highest and best part of the world, or make the world only an appearance. This difference is fundamental, because under any pagan conception, the properly Christian mysteries – the *relations* that Christianity understands God to be involved in, within himself and with his creatures: the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, the Church, the Sacraments, grace – would not be mysteries, but mere incoherences. Creation “opens up the logical and theological space” for them.

He also shows how the mysteries do not just presuppose and “fill in” the distinction. They positively sharpen and enhance it, in such a way that its Christian presentation stands apart even from that of the other “monotheistic” religions. Consider the Incarnation.

«In the natural order of things, each being is one kind of being. In being what it is, each thing excludes other kinds of being And since the divine as part of the world is one of the natures in the world, in the natural order of things a god, as understood by pagan thinking, cannot be human For the Incarnation to be possible, the divine nature must not be conceived as one of the natures within the whole of the world. It must be conceived as so other to the world that the union in the Incarnation would not be an incoherence.

Thus the Jewish emphasis on the otherness of God, which provided the background for the life, teaching, and actions of Christ, was ratified and intensified by the belief in the Incarnation.» (p. 44)

Or the Holy Trinity.

«A pagan religious thinker might raise an objection to the understanding of God ... as the one who could be all that there is, even without the world. He might object that this is too extreme a projection of unity. It seems to remove the involvement of difference, otherness, multiplicity, relation, and exchange from the highest being, and it seems to remove any sense of community from the divine. It seems to remove the tasks that ought to be involved in being This is an objection that could be made if the divine were merely distinguished from the world and left in solitude. But part of the Christian understanding is that community, exchange, relation, and divergence are to be found within the divine nature, in the life of the Holy Trinity. The exchanges, relations, and divergences, as well as the community, are not the kind we are familiar with, and in no way do they subordinate God to a need for exchanges with the world; quite the contrary. Because of the abundance of the life of the Holy Trinity, God becomes even more independent in his nature of any involvement with anything that is not divine. This independence of nature, of course, does not become indifference; rather, it defines both Creation and Redemption as all the more generous and unecessitated.» (pp. 44-45)

Of course the Christian distinction also affects the way we take the world. It brings to the surface a sense in which the world is “unnecessitated” and can be questioned. It “profiles” things against the possibility of not existing at all. However, this possibility is strictly a function of the creator’s freedom. The distinction does not make the world look flimsy. It does not void the natures or inner necessities of things. And so it does not undermine philosophy; quite the contrary. This consideration is crucial for Sokolowski’s entire project.

Equally crucial is the fact that the distinction itself is something exquisitely intelligible. It engages the understanding at the very edge of its natural exercise, the point of entry into the supernatural orbit. It «stands at the intersection of faith and reason» (p. 19). Christian faith lets philosophy be itself, but it hardly leaves it alone. Christianity both challenges and stimulates philosophical reason in a way that no other religion has or can.

He pays a remarkable amount of attention to the ways in which things, and persons, show themselves in and through language – not just by being talked about, but also, and in some respects more revealingly, by installing their own connatural modes of discourse and linguistic performance. Letting these emerge is itself one of the ways in which the linguistic animal exercises his function as “agent of truth” – a formula that Sokolowski takes as at once “a good paraphrase for the definition of the human being” and expressive of the slant that phenomenology takes on man (p. 77). There are essays on “Christian Religious Discourse”, “Praying the Canon of the Mass” (a must for priests), “Language, the Human Person, and Christian Faith”, and “The Revelation of the Holy Trinity: a Study in Personal Pronouns”. In this last he shows how the Trinity is first and most unambiguously manifested, not in “third person” information (however authoritative) about it, but in the utterances by which Christ displays it “from within”, especially through his declarative uses of the word

I in revealing the Father and in revealing himself as the Father's Word. «This use of the term *I* reveals the person of the speaker in its actual exercise, in its being-at-work as a person» (p. 136).

Also noteworthy is the very prominent role that Sokolowski assigns to the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, in the effective disclosure of Christian truth.

I have dwelt mostly on the book's leading ideas, but I hope I have not given the impression that it is only about these. It is about a great variety of things, many of which are not matters only for philosophy and theology, and none of which is treated in a way that only philosophers and theologians can understand or profit from. Some titles: "The Identity of the Bishop", "The Human Person and Political Life", "The Christian Difference in Personal Relationships", "What is Natural Law?", "The Art and Science of Medicine", "The Fiduciary Relationship and the Nature of Professions", "Religion and Psychoanalysis", "Church Tradition and the Catholic University", "Philosophy in the Seminary Curriculum".

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