Muslim-Christian Relations

On Being Liked

James Alison

This book is a scholarly and creative contribution towards re-imagining a contemporary theology of salvation. In order to hear the Gospel as Good News, Alison suggests, we need to replace the age-old question – how does God deal with sin? – with what he considers to be the more profound question: how can we take up the divine initiative to share in the act of creation?

This attempt to think salvation and creation together is the book’s prime theological concern and particular focus of chapters two to four: “unpicking atonement’s knots”, “re-imagining forgiveness” and “creation in Christ”. Alison deconstructs the traditional approach to Christian salvation in which Christ accounts to God for human sinfulness through his “substitutionary atonement” on the Cross. Although based on biblical data – Christ the ransom who pays the sacrifice – Alison highlights a number of problems: reducing salvation to a theory; implicating God and his Son “in some sort of consensual form of S&M” (22); undervaluing creation, resurrection and revelation vis-à-vis salvation; overvaluing sin and morals (versus God) as the central focus of the salvation drama; idolization and false sense of power which fail to read salvation as the “real story told by the crucified and risen victim and his followers” (28).

In order to reconstruct an approach to salvation that is both biblical and contemporary, Alison re-tells the story of Jesus in light of the universal human tendency to demand victims to carry our human guilt. [The anthropological insights of René Girard are foundational in Alison’s works]. “The old sacrificial way of understanding salvation” (xiii) simply accepts this need for victims – only this time it is God who is doing the demanding! But what if Jesus’ death was not an appeasement to the Father, but rather a manner of placing an end to the need for human victims or scapegoats once and for all? The one who is without sin and guilt freely becomes the victim-sacrifice in order to show us a way of living that neither demands victims nor fears death. The two go together. The approach has no meaning without the story of the resurrection; and the resurrection only has meaning in context of the Christian doctrine of creation.
There is then a whole shift of perspective when the Christian account of salvation is transformed from “a form of ineffectual moral bullying” to a divine invitation “opened up for us by Jesus’ giving himself to death at our hands” and empowering us “to be on the inside of God’s creative act” (64). In this approach, salvation is not a theory but a process of discovering how God invites us to share in the divine, creative activity. We can only make this discovery if we “remove ourselves from relationships of violence” and are empowered by the Holy Spirit “to live as if death were not” (59). This in turn requires the ability to read the Scriptures with fresh eyes, which is the book’s most precious gift.

In the second triptych—chapters six to eight—issues of power, violence, death, forgiveness, love, truth and conscience are negotiated with the voice of one who describes himself “creating a new story of catholicity as a gay man” (xiii). [This is a project already begun in his Faith beyond resentment: fragments catholic and gay (DLT, London, 2001)]. This is an important voice whose message has ramifications not only or even primarily for gay and lesbian people, but for all who wish “to live truthfully and with conscience in and as Church” (xiv). The deepest concern is not the gay issue per se, but the ability to create an honest discourse about “the fallibility of the Church” (without which any notion of infallibility makes little sense).

Affirming the Catholic theological view of the Church founded by Jesus and built on Peter, Alison reminds us that Jesus stands in rivalry to the Temple-powers and that Peter is an image of weakness. To this he adds: “the point of the Pope and the Vatican is not that it is the Temple, but that it is Peter” (126). Let us not then get caught up in rivalry, resentment and power politics (Church-as-Temple); let us rather learn to speak the truth in love and minister as best we can by feeding the Lord’s sheep (Shepherding with Peter). This is at heart a cry – in the phraseology of J.B Metz – to transform a Church of dependants into a Church of adults.

Alison’s creative flare is also evident in the book’s third or ‘contemplative’ triptych: “contemplation in a world of violence” (chapter one); “confessions of a former marginaholic” (chapter five);
and “the strangeness of this passivity” (chapter nine). ’Midst these pages, one discerns something of the personal faith-journey of the author who struggles with issues of sexuality and violence in a world and Church too often caught up in false rituals of transcendence. In his neat phrase which gives the book its title, being called to contemplation, compassion and transcendence is to experience ourselves not just ‘loved’ but, indeed, ‘liked’ by God! To take on the heart and mind of Jesus is to step outside the ego-space of marginality, alienation and shame (fearing oneself unworthy) and finding oneself gifted into being and invigorated “to love and tell the truth” (113). Here, no longer in exile, one is set free to become in life and ministry, to use Henri Nouwen’s felicitous image, “the wounded healer”. Or to quote from a Noel Rowe poem: “It is a gift to those found free in the Spirit” (Resurrection).

_On Being Liked_ is an adventurous and courageous work from a number of perspectives. It provides a new understanding of salvation integrally connected to Catholic doctrines of revelation, resurrection and creation. Based on new insight into the biblical witness, this approach to salvation – yet to be fully developed – deserves to be seriously considered by theologians and pastors. While the book tells this story of salvation from the perspective of a marginalized group within the Church, it is nonetheless a story with universal significance. The author gets behind our guard with his refreshing ability to name the fears and shames, hopes and dreams, that drive human beings and society – both within and beyond the Church. He then shows us how the Christian Gospel is able to provide authentic paths to transcendence in a world faced with new ruptures – and in need of a new story. For those open to a little theological subversion and reinvigoration, _On Being Liked_ makes a significant contribution towards the writing of this new story.