

Laval théologique et philosophique



Margaret O'GARA, Michael VERTIN, ed., *No Turning Back. The Future of Ecumenism*. Forwards by Richard J. Sklba and David M. Thompson. Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 2014, xxvi-253 p.

Mark Lecompte

Volume 72, Number 3, October 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040366ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040366ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Lecompte, M. (2016). Review of [Margaret O'GARA, Michael VERTIN, ed., *No Turning Back. The Future of Ecumenism*. Forwards by Richard J. Sklba and David M. Thompson. Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 2014, xxvi-253 p.] *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 72(3), 532–534. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040366ar>

Margaret O'GARA, Michael VERTIN, ed., **No Turning Back. The Future of Ecumenism**. Forwards by Richard J. Sklba and David M. Thompson. Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 2014, XXVI-253 p.

No turning back is not a thesis but rather a compilation of theses. It is the fruit of Michael Vertin's idea of compiling several of Margaret O'Gara's articles, posthumously, regarding ecumenism, which according to Vertin, O'Gara's widow, is the "effort of Christians to foster the visible unity of Jesus' church [...] foreshadowing the communion of saints around the banquet table of the Lamb".

Ogara died in 2012 at the age of sixty-five after thirty-six years as member of the Faculty of theology at St. Michael's College in Toronto. She also served on six different ecumenical dialogues. She was considered an *Ecumenical Theologian*, whose writings, according to Vertin, were the product of *painstaking research, careful argumentation, and ecumenical scholarship*. Bishop Richard J. Sklba points out in his forward that "Margaret knew all too well that ecumenical pilgrimage requires hard work", adding that she was both creative and careful in her approach. Although Rev. Lowell G. Almen, in his promotional comments, states that O'Gara "recognized that the unity of the church is not ours to create. It is a gift", it did not prevent her from working hard, writing prolifically, praying much and suffering much in her indefatigable attempt to promote understanding and unity among the various church families. She goes as far as to describe ecumenical dialogue is a "form of asceticism" (p. 35).

There are two forwards in the book ; one by Bishop Sklba and the other by a professor (David M. Thompson) indicating that this particular work intends on being pastoral as well as academic and practical as well as theoretical. The introductory quotes (first pages and back cover) complimenting the book and highlighting its beneficial contribution also include pastors, professors, seminary directors, and conference leaders from a variety of movements and church families — even including a Pentecostal, not historically reputed for ecumenical effort — reflecting academic and pastoral opinions as well as ecumenical collaboration and input.

The compilation of articles is divided into two distinct parts, with eight articles in each section. The first eight articles aim at introducing the ecumenical perspective to general readers, whereas the final eight aim at presenting a deeper perspective for ecumenical specialists.

Some articles (chapters) are captivating, inspiring and beneficial (i.e. chapter one where her purpose is well stated and illustrated), whereas other are less interesting and beneficial (i.e. chapter two, which is brief and uninformative). O'Gara's appeal, in chapters five, six and seven, for all churches and denominations to not only pray, but pray together, listen to God and to each other, in a non-competitive environment of friendship and collaboration, citing the prophets, Jesus and certain Pauline Epistles is certainly inspiring and possibly more effective as a method in achieving unity than debate and argumentation.

The last eight chapters do not offer anything more profound than the first eight, and are somewhat repetitive. The repetition and overlap of ideas can be excused by the fact that these are a compilation of articles and not an individual and unique thesis, as explained by the editor (p. XXII). There are some interesting practical principles regarding pastoring the sheep, as well as pastoring the pastors in the last section of the book. O'Gara's description of the role of the Holy Spirit in chapter is interesting, at times inspiring, but also very practical avoiding the extremes of mysticism, where the "Holy Spirit dispenses with human process" and rationalism, where "the action of the Holy Spirit is simply identified as the shrewdest thinkers in the community". O'Gara sums up her point of view well when she states ; "the Holy Spirit always assists the church precisely through its

cognitional process of communal questioning and discovery rather than replacing them with some type of privileged intuition.”

It is evident that due to O’Gara being “thoroughly Catholic” (Skiba’s description), she is not hesitant to be hard, or even harsh, with the Catholic Church, more so than with the Protestant or Evangelical Church. This is no more evident than when she addresses the sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, in the first article, as “especially lamentable” and one of the largest hurdles towards unity between Protestants and Catholics. She also states in chapter four : “Some of you may feel that the Roman Catholic Church is quick to point out the wounds of other churches [...] but rather disinclined to see its own woundedness”. One has to admire her candidness but wonder whether she is being too gentle on other movements and church families due to courtesy. One of O’Gara’s solutions to this dilemma is what she terms as “the purification of memories” which she not only explains but advocates in chapter three using Catholics and Mennonites as examples.

Chapter ten explains the purification of past memories in depth and with more detail, although the subject comes up in several chapters, indicating it is an important step in the process of achieving unity according to O’Gara. She illustrates hurdles to unity by using actual and historical examples of conflict in addition to real life attempts at achieving solutions. Certainly, devotional practices honoring Mary remain a major obstacle, especially if they attempt to replace Christ as redeemer and Saviour. O’Gara considers the papacy a gift offered by the Roman Catholic Church although not everyone would concur. O’Gara agrees that “receiving gifts is not the only difficult part of the ecumenical gift exchange. Even offering them suitably can be a challenge” (p. 21). O’Gara is honest enough to admit that the papacy “is a gift for the whole church but first it needs repair”. Chapter nine is O’Gara’s attempt to “repair” the obstacle if Papal primacy and sovereignty. She treads lightly in attempting to defend, or at least explain Papal primacy, obviously aware that is one of the major hurdles in achieving Roman Catholic and Protestant ecumenical unity. She does state, however, that “the pope cannot place himself above the word of God” (p. 76), and describes what she terms as a “shift” in the Roman Catholic Church towards “the centrality of the Word of God”. This should be encouraging to Protestants.

There are several books regarding ecumenism and unity that read more like a plea for unity than an intelligent report regarding ecumenism. They appeal more to sentimentality than intelligence and fact ; as if we should all gather around the camp-fire hold hands and sing “Kum by yah” without regards to very real historical and doctrinal reasons for division in the first place. O’Gara’s articles certainly have an appeal for greater unity among church families — her heart for ecumenism is evident — however her approach is very academic, factual and realistic regarding the issues that hinder ecumenism. Her adherence to the World Council of Churches statement : “Our continuing divisions are real wounds to the body of Christ, and God’s mission in the world suffers” ; seems to have motivated her to work hard at making the “gift” of unity an actual reality. For this, she can certainly be admired. As Thompson points out in his forward, O’Gara’s ecumenical efforts were accompanied by much prayer, more than a little impatience, and more sorrow than joy, leading one to conclude that ecumenism is not easy.

Also, despite O’Gara’s plea for unity she admits, in chapter four, that “while I share recognition of baptism in my home parish, with all the other Christian churches, I cannot yet partake of the Eucharist with, and so the catholicity of the whole church is damaged”.

In conclusion, it is possible that the entire crux on the matter, or the challenge if you will, is summed up on a couple of pages, starting with p. xv of the editor’s comments when he states : “Christian churches fiercely competing with each other for converts”. Politics and power are possi-

bly, or perhaps even probably, the greatest challenges to ecumenism than doctrine. O’Gara would probably agree. The other challenge is found in O’Gara’s statement : “[...] some Roman Catholics feel they don’t want to reform the papacy so it can be shared with others ; they want it all for themselves, as a source of their ‘identity’”. The retention and protection of identity certainly applies to all religious movements and certainly remains a huge challenge to unity. Typical of O’Gara, throughout the entirety of her articles, she refers to a Roman Catholic challenge, or weakness, hoping all religious movement and families can identify themselves in it. She succeeds. At the very least *No Turning Back* gives non-Catholics a much better understanding of Catholic doctrinal positions as well as challenges, from the perspective of a life-long Catholic and theologian, and at the very best it inspires Christians, leaders, pastors and communicators of all denominations to continue to work towards unity, understanding, and an ability to agree to disagree without hostility, suspicion and contention.

Mark LECOMPTE
Université Laval, Québec

Teresa OBOLEVITCH, **La philosophie religieuse russe**. Traduction du russe de Maria Gawron-Zaborska. Préface de Maryse Dennes. Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf (coll. « Philosophie & Théologie »), 2014, 275 p.

Ouvrage dense, ramassé, l’œuvre que signe ici Obolevitch sait nous plonger dans le charme intellectuel typiquement oriental de ces auteurs prolifiques, presque tous de grands évadés du mysticisme orthodoxe, ce qui colore fortement leurs propos quand ils interrogent le réel et la Révélation à la recherche de la vérité.

L’orthodoxie ne prouve pas l’existence de Dieu : elle l’éprouve, elle la ressent. Ce tempérament spirituel place tout penseur religieux slave dans un contexte unique. Il fallait rendre cette disposition particulière, et l’auteur y parvient heureusement, sans favoritisme dans le choix des auteurs présentés et sans le biais des commentaires personnels.

Remarquablement qualifiée pour faire connaître les protagonistes majeurs de la recherche philosophico-théologique dans l’aire culturelle slave, du Moyen Âge jusqu’à nos jours, en passant par le siècle des Lumières, Teresa Obolevitch nous présente ici un remarquable « cours 101 » de la pensée religieuse russe, capable de nous faire découvrir l’invisible par ce qui est visible.

Qu’il s’agisse de la pensée de Skovoroda, un ukrainien, ou de celle de Tchaadaev, un russe, chaque auteur est présenté dans ce qu’il a de plus original. Sont mis en vedette des auteurs célèbres, tel Dostoïevski, à travers son exploration du mystère de la liberté. Ou Tolstoï, ce rebelle qui rejette les dogmes et qui critique tellement l’Église orthodoxe qu’il est excommunié par elle après la publication de son roman *Résurrection*. Et bien sûr Soloviev, figure centrale de la philosophie religieuse russe, mis en valeur de façon magistrale. Mais d’autres, moins connus, sont aussi l’objet de recension judicieuse : Kireïevsky, Khomiakov, Losski, Florensky, Frank, Berdiaev, Chestov, Boulgakov et Losev, pour ne citer que ceux-là.

Les Occidentaux que nous sommes sont ici mis en présence d’une pensée tout à la fois familière et mystérieuse. Située où elle est, à l’intersection de l’Orient et de l’Occident, la Slavonie n’appartient ni à l’un ni à l’autre. Son aspect familial nous rejoint à travers les thèmes métaphysiques classiques. Mais la vision slave des contenus théologiques demeure pour nous mystérieuse, parce que, davantage que l’âme occidentale, l’âme slave se nourrit des grandes émotions, des grandes entreprises, des grandes passions.