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Reviews

Gregory Wolfe. *The Operation of Grace: Further Essays on Art, Faith, and Mystery.* Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015. 224 pp. \$25.00, ISBN 9781625640574.

Reviewed by **Jonathan A. Anderson, Art, Biola University**

Gregory Wolfe has been a leading voice in the “faith and the arts” discourse for many years. He is the publisher and founding editor of *Image* journal, a literary quarterly devoted to exploring the nexus of “Art, Faith, Mystery,” as announced in the journal’s subtitle. Wolfe’s newest book, *The Operation of Grace*, is a collection of 35 short essays, most of which were written as editorial statements for the pages of *Image*. The “Further” in the subtitle of this book highlights the fact that this is the second such collection; the first appeared as *Intruding Upon the Timeless: Meditations on Art, Faith, and Mystery* (Square Halo Books, 2003). This new book grows out of, and is an artifact of, Wolfe’s ongoing efforts to create more meaningful, more mutually enriching encounters between the worlds of serious religious thinking and serious artistic practice.

Because this is a collection of editorials written over many years, the lines of thought proceed not in the form of sustained argumentation but in discrete vignettes and meditations. The chapters are short excursions into a variety of topics, drawing insights from history, politics, theology, and personal experiences in order to cultivate a more generative “cross-fertilization of art and faith, and the ways that these two fundamental human experiences can renew lives and communities” (121). The literary references in these essays are rich and diverse—ranging from Thomas More to Gustave Flaubert and Orhan Pamuk—as are Wolfe’s engagements with the visual arts, which include everything from the ancient cave paintings in Chauvet to the paintings of Giotto and the films of Andrei Tarkovsky. Such a compilation threatens to become disjointed, but Wolfe’s organization of the volume helps to unify it into a coherent, compelling whole.

Following a preface and prologue that provide some helpful framing, the subsequent essays are arranged into six parts, which generally move from more theoretical toward more vocational questions. Parts 1 and 2 establish a two-way exchange in which “Art Speaks to Faith” and then “Faith Speaks to Art.” The first explores the ways that key issues in the arts—beauty, tragedy, ambiguity, longing, and so on—not only offer occasions for deep religious thinking but even imply it, in that our strongest experiences of aesthetic meaning demand that “the deepest metaphysical questions are still available to us” (19; see also 192-193). Conversely, Wolfe believes that the deep wells of Christian tradition have much to

offer to contemporary artists: he draws upon insights from Irenaeus of Lyons, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Luigi Giussani (founder of the Catholic Communion and Liberation movement) to argue for a Christianity energized by a sacramental imagination. Parts 3 and 4 then seek to expand the workspace for such an imagination, first by critiquing the contentious political framing of "Art and Faith in the Public Square" in recent years and then by trying to establish a different historical-theological framework for "Christian Humanism: Then and Now." Lastly, parts 5 and 6 offer more personal reflections on what it means to inhabit this kind of framework, both in terms of devoting oneself to "Words and the Word: The Writing Life" and through a series of "Scenes from a Literary Life." Wolfe's aim throughout is to renegotiate relations among Christian tradition, modern secularity, and the contemporary worlds of the arts.

This collection of essays unfolds outward in many different directions, yet the attentive reader can readily discern the same threads of thought woven throughout. Wolfe highlights the strongest of these unifying threads in his preface, "A Metaphorical God." Alluding directly to the same "trinity of terms" employed in the subtitle of *Image* (ix), Wolfe orients his writing as pursuing "the analogies between art and faith in search of mystery" (xiii). His wager is that at a very deep level art and faith bear structural, even genetic, similarities in the ways they strive to make sense of the transcendent *mystique* of life—and thus the ability to think analogically between them is requisite to understanding either adequately. In fact, he argues that art and religious faith are the deepest sources of cultural formation: "From these two springs come the fundamental symbols and emotional attachments of a social order" (81). He objects to modern tendencies to reduce either of these to mere ideology or *politique*; instead he argues that both art and faith derive from a more existential, primordial responsiveness to the world—an "openness to divine mystery, an openness that requires humility and a vivid awareness of the fragility and contingency of our human formulations" (82). In this sense we might argue that "art provides the best analogy for the moment of recognition that is our experience of the Event [of Christian faith]" (61). In drawing attention to the analogical structures of artmaking and faithmaking, Wolfe then questions the extent to which grace is in "operation" in both.

The essay from which the book title is taken, "The Operation of Grace," appears relatively late in the book (157-161). It unfolds as a meditation on the war-era poetry of T. S. Eliot and Evelyn Waugh, who are presented as potent examples of the analogical imagination straining to discern "signs of grace in the midst of personal and social fragmentation" (158). Wolfe borrows his title from Waugh, who wanted his novels to show "the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters" (160). Wolfe seems to welcome the multiple meanings that the term *operation* elicits here. Like Waugh, he is interested in art's ability to disclose the *function* of grace within everyday life—signs that God's grace is in "operation" even amidst devastation—yet this term also connotes a *tactical mission* or a *surgical procedure*. All of these are pertinent: Wolfe believes in art's capacities both to reveal the operation of grace always already in our lives and to enact (perhaps painfully) the tactical and/or surgical operation of grace to rescue and redeem life, even at the cost of wounding.

Wolfe argues that recognizing these operations of grace necessitates a renewed vision "to see the inherent religious sense in human beings; we need to awaken the connection between desire and its home in God" (50). Indeed, his call for deeper analogical thinking is coextensive with his call for the renewal of a Christian humanism that resolutely embraces the goodness of creaturely limitations (physical, temporal contingency) and the dignity of our desires in the face of those limits: "What if grace enters in and through these limita-

tions? ... The religious sense, inherent in human nature, grows out of the awareness of our dependence; it is marked by an intuition that existence itself is a gift and that the proper response to it is wonder" (49). For Wolfe, recognizing the sheer givenness of all things also implies recognizing a profound sacramental depth within all things: "What we need is not the notion of a world that ought to be but the capacity to see the dimension of grace irradiating the world that *is*. It seems to me that if we are to be redeemed, it must be in and through the way we *are*" (49). Thus he largely eschews the potential contributions of eschatological thinking within the faith and arts conversation (which means that he mostly ignores Reformed thinking on the subject, for which *shalom* is a pivotal notion). Nevertheless, this allows him to isolate a sense in which grace "operates" in the arts: "The artist maintains her gaze at human neediness and dependency" and "shows us the world as it is, here and now, and enables us to see that our redemption is always present, always available" (50-51).

Numerous parables of the analogical imagination appear throughout Wolfe's chapters. Particularly powerful is his chapter "Becoming the Other" (139-143), which focuses on an Italian Jesuit priest named Matteo Ricci (whose Chinese name was Li Madou) who came to China as a missionary in 1582. Wolfe is interested in the extent to which Ricci and his Jesuit brothers "chose to listen before they spoke. They looked for analogies to what they knew and who they were" (140). Wolfe sees in Ricci an exemplary Christian humanism manifested in "his confidence that the incarnation implied that all human cultures bore the imprint of God's nature and had something precious to offer the world" (141). Christ's incarnation, and the Christianity most faithfully following from it, is not the way of colonial triumphalism but the way of self-giving kenotic love. Ricci hoped for the conversion of China to Christianity, but he also saw the "need to open ourselves more consistently and generously to the existence of those who are no longer as far away as they once were" (141). Wolfe sees here a model for developing a richer life of faith within the contemporary arts—one which dissociates itself from a culture warrior mentality and instead cultivates common ground in genuine love of others, even with a willingness "to sacrifice what we think makes us different" (143).

In many ways, the most elegant and moving chapters are the last two, which are also the most introspective. In the penultimate chapter, Wolfe surprisingly (though brilliantly) draws Malcolm Muggeridge and Christopher Hitchens into posthumous conversation, culminating in a poignant meditation on the experience of finding one's own motivations to be marked by duality, even contradiction. Once again he advocates for a posture of humility among those seeking to draw art and faith closer together: "Perhaps that's the thing about duality: once you sense how deeply divided the human heart is, you lose the sort of swagger and singularity needed to be the scourge of the age" (199). And this presses him once again toward faith-rooted-in-love, which "drives me toward an inclusive vision that reconciles divided peoples and riven hearts" (199). In the final chapter, he meditates on the biblical link between breath and Spirit, using his own lifelong condition of asthma as an image for experiencing "the wheezings of the spirit" in his life (204). Quoting von Balthasar, he argues that the Spirit "wishes to breathe only through us, not to present himself to us as an object; he does not wish to be seen but to be the seeing eye of grace in us" (204). Wolfe thus places the pneumatological *operation* of grace not in the realm of observable things but in the very receiving and perceiving of the world. Even if our condition profoundly restricts our breathing and dims our seeing, the Spirit of grace is always already working to restore and re-enliven. And for Wolfe, art is one of the primary sites where this kind of spiritual operation takes place.