



Christianity: the expression of faith gets a facelift

Jesus the Forgiving Victim

Review by David Roure

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Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice

James Alison

Born in England in 1959, Fr. Alison, a former member of the Dominican Order, warns readers from the outset: he wants to present the content of Christian faith from “an unexpected angle,” beyond “the obvious framework of understanding.”

“At least initially, I don’t want to give you the impression of having already seen and heard everything that is going to follow. Now that you are forewarned, you can let yourself be carried away!”

A successful wager

Wagering on this approach to the topic was not easy, but in the end Fr. Alison has met the challenge quite well. Similarly, even Christians very familiar with religious works will make some great discoveries in this book, all of them original, some even somewhat destabilizing, using a number of unusual and even intriguing expressions that often hit the target. Our author has seasoned his writing, like a good Anglo-Saxon, with little stories about the most ordinary aspects of daily life as well as from today’s fashionable heroes, from Harry Potter to *Charlie Hebdo*! All the same, his discourse is sound and we sense Fr. James’ intellectual and theological skill, even his erudition, despite certain phrases or expressions that may seem a bit too sophisticated or complicated.

A kind, credible, liberating Christianity

His aim is nevertheless simple and can be summed up in one short sentence: he wants to introduce us to a fresh view of Christianity as kind, credible and liberating. To do this, he brilliantly attacks clichés that are commonplace, even among Christians: an unclear Biblical message, an ill adapted and castrating Church, narrow morality, etc. For example, he concludes a chapter on the Bible by saying: “Far from being a weapon for moralizing brutes, when ‘the big bad Book’ is in fearless hands, it can become the ground for the sublime and wonderful act of God’s communication.” And a little farther on, he talks about faith itself: “Faith is the usual tendency to relax in the certainty of God’s goodness towards us, which is shown in the positive project that assigns the place of

shame not to us, but to His Son” and: “(...) we perceive that an Other has discovered us. And that he has not discovered us to humiliate us, but to give us more.

The author’s Protestant background

Two specific characteristics of the author should be highlighted: first, he is a recognized specialist on the work of the French philosopher and critic René Girard and he refers several times to his theories, particularly the now famous one of the “*scapegoat*.” Second, he was raised a Protestant and one day made the choice to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church, to which he expresses – sometimes in a very subtle way – his profound attachment!

As readers progress, they may find the process a bit repetitive and the stories a little too long or far-fetched, especially in the book’s second-and-third-to-the-last chapters dealing with salvation in the Church and the Church as an institution.

Fortunately, the last chapter may well gain their enthusiastic support: it is devoted entirely to learning how to live as a Christian. As the book’s title indicates, the important thing for Fr. Alison is “to abide by a non-moralizing commandment” and live “the love of others as a way of participating in God’s love.” Inspired by Saint Luke, James Alison, who began his book with a commentary on the episode of the disciples of Emmaus, concludes his 12 lessons with a beautiful meditation inspired by the Good Samaritan!