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BOOK REVIEW

The Christian God: Collected Essays

Shutte, A. (Ed. Patrick Giddy), (Johannesburg: UJ
University Press, 2024), ISBN 1923206370

The Christian God is a self-reflective and philosophically astute collection of theological essays by the late South African Catholic philosopher-theologian Augustine Shutte (1938-2016). Curated with a short preface by Patrick Giddy, the volume gathers writings that span the breadth of Shutte's intellectual career, offering both an autobiographical narrative of sorts – outlined by the author himself in an opening chapter – as well as a sustained engagement with the Christian tradition in dialogue with contemporary philosophical and cultural concerns.

We have come to know Shutte's prominence as a Catholic philosopher, who trained at the Universities of Cape Town (UCT) and Stellenbosch (US), through several notable monographs that delivered a Thomistic theological anthropology accessible to both secular and African contexts (Shutte 1983, 1993a, 1993b, 2001). Over his more than 40 years at UCT, these texts would elevate the themes for which he became most well-known: a theological humanism deeply embedded in the Christian tradition, African philosophy, and, in particular, the concept of *ubuntu*. With this volume, we have not only access to the highlights of this intellectual achievement, but also, more precisely, a new insight into the trajectory of concerns that were percolating already in his earliest writings right the way through to his "mature" theological statements.

From the outset, Shutte's work is marked by a rare combination of intellectual rigour and existential honesty. Early essays such as "Jesus now" and "Christology now," reproduced in this volume, wrestle candidly with the foundational Christian claim of the incarnation. Rather than offering superficial doctrinal affirmations, Shutte explores what it might mean to speak meaningfully of Jesus as divine in a post-metaphysical or secular, and indeed, relational framework. He frequently critiques the traditional language of Chalcedonian Christology as inadequate for modern sensibilities (p. 41), yet he does not dismiss it; instead, he seeks to reinterpret it through the lens of human subjectivity and interpersonal love. Indeed, interpersonal life is a central feature in Shutte's thought, and one of the volume's central philosophical contributions is his focus on intersubjectivity as a theological category. Essays such as "Love of persons: Unselfish love as manifestation of spirituality" (1979) and "What makes us persons?" (1984), seek to ground the human person in a metaphysics of relationality, which also turns on an argument for the existence of God. Prominent interlocutors for Shutte are the likes of Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner, and the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, conversations with whom are all driven by the desire to establish, through a theological paradigm and an African concept of *ubuntu*, a framework for personhood as essentially being dialogical – a view with implications for ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and ethical reflection. In two early essays, "Sign, symbol and sacrament" (1969) and "The church and the sacraments" (1969), Shutte argues for a demythologised but richly personal understanding of sacramental practice. In this instance, readers will find a rigorous yet accessible reinterpretation of Aquinas' *dictum* that sacraments "cause by signifying", brought into conversation with modern semiotics and the performative dimension of language (pp. 58-60).

The volume also contains theological interventions with immediate relevance for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. "Dialogue between religions" offers a generous, humanistic rationale for interfaith engagement, appealing to a shared spiritual vocation grounded in human dignity rather than doctrinal exclusivism. Here, Shutte develops his position precisely by drawing on the reference to the African motto: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (p. 335).

For an academic audience, *The Christian God* offers several compelling points of entry. It will appeal to scholars working at the intersection of philosophy and theology, particularly those engaged with questions as to how to reinterpret the Christian tradition in a secular, pluralistic, and scientifically aware world. Moreover, readers interested in Rahnerian theology, African philosophy, or the integration of personalism with systematic theology will find Shutte's essays both challenging and constructive. The text's autobiographical elements also offer a unique perspective on the intellectual and ecclesial

landscape of South Africa during and after apartheid, enriching the contextual depth of his theological reflections.

Nevertheless, the book's strength in thematic coherence and philosophical depth is, at times, offset by its stylistic informality. Given that the volume includes both previously published and unpublished papers – some written as public lectures, talks, or others as student essays – readers should not expect a complete systematic theology. Rather, it is more theology-in-process, more suggestive than definitive, and this is also to be viewed as its strength. For some, this may be a part of its appeal: *The Christian God* does not provide answers, but models a way of doing theology that is honest, humane, and intellectually generous.

In short, Shutte's *The Christian God* is a significant contribution to South African systematic and historical theology. It deserves attention from academics interested in the future of Christian thought, particularly those seeking to engage the tradition critically, imaginatively, and in dialogue with both philosophical inquiry and the lived realities of faith in the modern world. Finally, its attention to Thomistic conceptions of personhood and African accounts of sociality suggest a genuine *African philosophical theology* (Delport 2021). Patrick Giddy should be commended for bringing this gift of theology to fruition.

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