

The Achievements of Vigen Guroian

Books Reviewed in this Essay:

The Fragrance of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 128+ pp. ISBN-10: 0-8028-3076-5.

Rallying the Really Human Things: The Moral Imagination in Politics, Literature, and Everyday Life (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2005), 254+ pp. ISBN: 1-932236-50-3.

If Vigen Guroian did not exist, it would be necessary for Orthodox theology in North America to invent him. For if theology in general is today in many respects completely recondite to the vast majority of people on this continent – a result of the thoroughgoing if incoherent secularization of our time but also a result of the deeply confused and controverted role of theologians in the modern multiversity – then Orthodox theology is all the more so, and so-called non-Chalcedonian Orthodox theology more obscure still. Apart from Guroian, who is Armenian Orthodox, there are too few Eastern Orthodox – never mind so-called non-Chalcedonians – writing with his demonstrated breadth of interests or ability to engage crucial cultural questions in a way that remains not only fully (but not uncritically¹) Orthodox but also accessibly relevant and ecumenically engaged. His willingness to undertake substantial scholarly engagement with other major interlocutors in the Catholic and Protestant traditions – and not simply professional theologians, either – is an especially commendable aspect of Guroian’s scholarship.

¹ Attention should be paid to Guroian’s remarkably critical essay “The Crisis of Orthodox Ecclesiology” in *The Ecumenical Future*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 162–75.

It is especially in the second of the books noted above that Guroian has managed to strike out of the ghettos of academic theology and Orthodox ecclesial circles to offer an engagement of, and response to, widespread cultural confusions and questions. He, a layman, has demonstrated that he has the heart of a pastor and father concerned about the souls of children² and young people. He, a self-described Orthodox churchman, has manifested an intimate familiarity with works one only rarely finds in standard Orthodox theology: the moral philosophy of the “Aristotelian-Thomist” Alasdair MacIntyre, the theological ethics of the “high church Methodist” Stanley Hauerwas, the fiction of the late southern writer Flannery O’Connor, or the political philosophy of the conservative thinker Russell Kirk³ – to say nothing of the many other diverse figures with whom Guroian is in sustained conversation. If – as Richard Weaver⁴ so famously said nearly sixty years ago – “ideas have consequences,” then Guroian’s ideas are to be taken seriously both for their own consequences and for the light they shed on the consequences of others’ ideas.

Guroian’s prolific engagements over the last two decades can perhaps be divided into two broad categories. First, at the level of what one might call “high” theology, we have his first

² Such concern is especially evident in another unique book one would not necessarily expect from the hand of an academic and Orthodox theologian, that is Guroian’s *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child’s Moral Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). First published in 1998 but published by Oxford University Press in 2002 in paperback, this book provides insightful advice to parents seeking to inculcate virtue in their children through the seemingly simple task of bedtime reading of fairy tales and other such stories. Moreover, Guroian is also concerned about what adults read. In this regard, see the short and incomplete chapter “Why Should Businessmen Read Great Literature” in *Rallying the Really Human Things* (pp. 177–86).

³ Curiously, Guroian is the editor of a posthumously published collection of Russell Kirk’s ghost stories! See *Ancestral Shadows: The Ghostly Tales of Russell Kirk*, ed. with an introduction by Vigen Guroian (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

⁴ Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

book, *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics*⁵ (which built on but in many ways necessarily surpassed the important pioneering work of Stanley Harakas⁶). In this central and important work, Guroian played a crucial role in bringing Orthodox theology into dialogue with modern ethical problems and theories, thereby demonstrating Orthodoxy's crucial relevance and unappreciated wisdom amidst the confusions and complexities of our time. This would be amplified and confirmed in his subsequent books including *Ethics After Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethic*⁷ and *Life's Living Toward Dying: A Theological and Medical Ethical Study*.⁸

At the second level of more broadly cultural engagements, we have, inter alia, the two books noted at the top of this review. The second book especially gives evidence of Guroian's wide-ranging reading in areas and among thinkers and writers too infrequently encountered today. These books show, moreover, an intellectual engagement that, in some respects, is open and accessible even to non-Orthodox or non-Christians who may share Guroian's concerns about the general decline of Western culture today.

George Weigel, the semi-official biographer of the late Pope John Paul II, tells us that when Karol Wojtyła was elected pope in 1978, he at once indicated what the *leitmotiv* of his pontificate would be. After the customary electoral announcement on the *loggia* by the protodeacon of the Roman Church, and after the initial greetings by the new bishop of Rome, "a theme had to be proclaimed. No one who knew him could doubt it would be Christian humanism."⁹ That theme is also very much the cohesive force holding together the essays of

⁵ This book was Guroian's first, published in 1987 and now in a second edition, published in 2002, by the University of Notre Dame Press. It has also been translated into Russian in the same year.

⁶ By whom see, inter alia, *Toward Transfigured Life: the Theoria of Eastern Orthodox Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1983).

⁷ (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994). The Hauerwasian influence on this volume is very clear from the title alone.

⁸ (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁹ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1999), 256.