

Portilla, Isaac. *What Christ Said: Revisiting the Countercultural Sayings of Jesus Christ*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2022, 136 p.

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Isaac Portilla has written a most interesting book. The cover recommendations and the acknowledgements reads like a who's who of contemporary theology. Portilla's book is addressed to nonconformist Christians, but in truth, it will appeal to a far wider readership both religious and non-religious.

The book has 10 chapters. Each begins with a saying of Jesus, as recorded in the New Testament. There follows seven short texts, meditative in nature, which contemplate the short sayings of Jesus. Each chapter concludes with a short Truth. By far the best chapter is the discussion of freedom (Chapter 4). (However, I am sure that readers will have their own preferences). Chapter 4 begins with the sayings: "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay down his head" (Matt 8: 20). Even so, he said further, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead" (8:22)" (p, 39). The chapter ranges from everyday topics like freedom from family constructs, to the more philosophical question of wholeness. Portilla brings new angles to each topic.

The writing is circumspect, sometimes poetic, other times more abrupt. The prose sits easily in the traditions of mysticism (both Christian and non-Christian). Indeed, the prose will appeal to those who consider themselves 'spiritual but not religious' (p. 75) and it will draw in those scholars and practitioners of inter-religious dialogue who are more familiar with the 'varieties of religious experience'. There is a deeply

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philosophical and theological exploration unfolding in each of the seven sections of each of the 10 chapters.

Portilla invites us on a meditative journey, a spiritual experience (or better to say, spiritual discipline, to cover the full range of the Christian tradition). The invitation is gentle and insistent; one that moves the reader into Love, Light and Life. Portilla writes from within the Christian tradition, but his language is not exclusivist. Philosophers and theologians, as well as spiritual seekers and followers of other religions and none will find resonances with the reflections in the book.

I read the book in my garden, under a banana tree. I did wonder where and how to read this book. It can easily be read in short sections, perhaps each day or evening on a retreat, or as part of a spiritual exercise. It can be read in a group setting or individually. It can be read amidst life's tasks, or free from them. The style of book reminded me of aspects of theology produced in cloisters, in prayer, in bygone eras. Portilla revives this way of doing theology, retrieving it from the confines of academic ivory towers, and setting the topics derived from the sayings of Jesus in the contexts of Freedom, Truth and Being.

The book engages hermeneutics. Indeed, the book is something of an exploration in phenomenology and hermeneutics. However, hermeneutics is a broad field; even in relation to theology and biblical studies. Therefore, a couple of questions appear to present themselves. Firstly, Portilla uses different translations of the Bible throughout his book to explore what Christ said in different meditative sections (the NIV, ESV and NKJV). I am not a biblical scholar, but I would be interested to learn more about this approach to textual hermeneutics and aesthetics. Secondly, the hermeneutics deployed by Portilla at times open startlingly new insights about the Christian Way, yet on closer examination, often those insights are derived from Patristics rather than the Bible or biblical scholarship.

The book navigates beautifully the Patristic² contributions of Simeon, the New Theologian and Gregory of Palamas. Both figures are

² I use the word 'Patristic' for both Simeon and Gregory in this case, in line with Portilla's own use in the book (p. 115) even though traditional (Western) Patristics would perhaps frown on inclusion of Christian writers from the 10th and 11th centuries in Patristics. Often, Simeon and Gregory are considered Patristic writers due to their place in the *Philokalia*.

totemic in Orthodox Christianity, but often less well known in Western (Roman Catholic and Protestant) Christianity. And for those readers with a philosophical background, the book is also at ease (although not agreement) with philosophical discussions in Nietzsche (freedom) and Heidegger (being), while Levinas (alterity) as well as the contemporary debates in physics are other points of dialogue. In other words, this is a wide-ranging and stimulating book. I hope that it finds a wide readership.