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## Book Review: Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021. \$30.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-4729-8924-6.**

**Reviewed by James R. Payton, Jr., Professor of Patristics and Historical Theology, McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada**

In this book, Rowan Williams offers the fruits of his rich engagement with the thought of Eastern Christianity over the course of his distinguished career. The chapters collected here are revisions of previously published contributions or reworked versions of presentations made at various scholarly conferences over the past few years. This is not just a jumble of somewhat related pieces tied together by the name of a significant scholar, though: the chapters hang together well, making for a coherent exposition of a significant theme. The respective contributions move forward in historical progression, from consideration of the significant and stimulating contributions of ancient Eastern Christians through to the present; they also build well on preceding chapters, offering a deepening and widening view onto a variety of questions relevant to how Western Christian thought could be stimulated and invigorated by insights from the profound Orthodox heritage.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lady Margaret Professor at Oxford, and Master of Magdalene College at Cambridge is well known for vast erudition in numerous fields. This volume shows how deeply he, as a Western Christian theologian and hierarch, has immersed himself in the challenging thought patterns of Eastern Christianity, from its early manifestations in Evagrios Pontikos and Maximos the Confessor, through the essence/energies elaborations occasioned by the profound teaching of St. Gregory Palamas, and into the rich contributions of Olivier Clément, Metropolitan John Zizioulas, and Christos Yannaras in the last few decades. He acknowledges (but does not particularly deal much with) the neo-patristic movement that has also shaped Eastern Christian thought as we have come to know it in the present. Along the way, Williams also interacts with deep insight with nineteenth-century Russian literature, indicating ways in which that

literature helped expound the role and significance of the “holy fool” who offers challenge to the ways sanctity has been understood and practiced within Orthodoxy.

Williams works deftly in all these areas. His facility in the Greek and Russian languages is evident in the footnotes which document his presentations. The vast extent of his erudition encompasses an impressive range of issues in Eastern Christian thought, and his interaction with a wide array of Orthodox perspectives leaves no doubt how thoroughly he has imbibed Eastern Christian approaches to significant doctrinal, metaphysical, and ethical issues. The hope he expresses in this book is that such Eastern Christian thought might become a stimulus to contemporary Western Christianity, burdened by the lassitude which seems (in his estimation) to have overwhelmed it.

This volume offers those who share that assessment and hope to find stimulation to reinvigorate Western Christian perspectives rich resources to work toward that goal. As Williams demonstrates, the profound and searching thought of Eastern Christianity, on a variety of interrelated topics expounded insightfully in this volume, opens vistas on Christian faith, practice, and life—both individually and collectively—which might serve to change the faith climate within Western Christianity in positive ways.