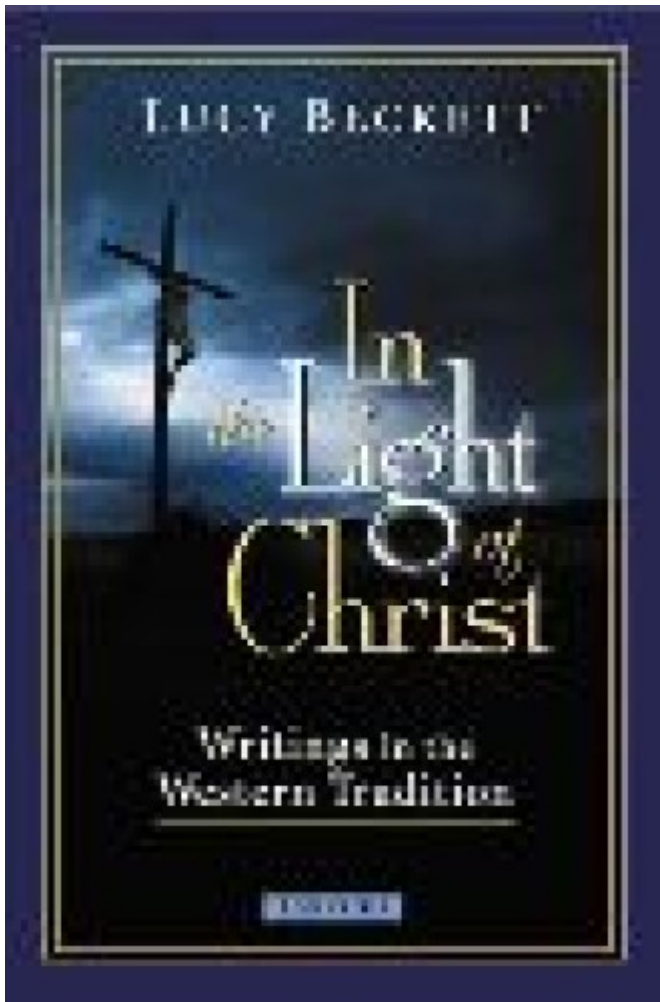


In the Light of Christ

reviewed by [David Heim](#) in the [April 3, 2007](#) issue

In Review



In the Light of Christ: Writings in the Western Tradition

Lucy Beckett
Ignatius

Great works in the Western literary tradition are incomprehensible apart from Christianity. One cannot understand Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Coleridge,

Dostoevsky or Dickinson without understanding the Christian faith that these writers assumed, professed or resisted. That much is evident to almost any student of the humanities.

Lucy Beckett is not just any student. Her claim that these writers make sense only “in the light of Christ” is not a historical observation but a theological assertion. The value of their works, she maintains—“that is to say, their truthfulness, beauty and goodness”—rests “in their relation to the absolute truth, beauty and goodness that are one in God and that are definitively revealed to the world in Christ.” Countless readers are justifiably attracted to these texts because, finally, they reflect some truth about God.

Underlying Beckett’s work is the conviction, classically articulated by Augustine, that truth, beauty and goodness are not things that humans create but aspects of God that humans participate in. The search for truth, beauty and goodness makes sense only because God is already at work in the created world, in scripture and in the soul, drawing us toward his truth, beauty and goodness. As Augustine said, “What have we, that we have not received?” Beckett specifies her claim in a series of essays marked by illuminating, unexpected biographical details and a close reading of individual texts.

The scope of her project—offering a consciously orthodox Christian reading of the Western canon—somewhat resembles that of the evangelical writer Francis Schaeffer, except that Beckett’s reading skills are more impressive and her theology more nuanced. Schaeffer measured writers against the yardstick of a rationalistic, propositional Christianity, and he had little interest in the texture of literature. Beckett works in the capacious Augustinian Catholic tradition (rearticulated by Hans Urs von Balthasar), in which beauty and goodness are dimensions of truth. This flexible theological perspective enables her to be deeply sympathetic to a wide variety of writers, from premodern to postmodern, while insisting on the definitiveness of Christian revelation.

An example of Beckett’s supple brand of Augustinian orthodoxy is her treatment of T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. Critics routinely juxtapose these poets as representing two opposite responses to the modern world: the traditionalist and the modernist. Eliot, after registering the moral disorder of the modern world in his poem “The Waste Land,” turned to orthodox Christian doctrine as the only source of personal and social stability; Stevens, by contrast, having resigned himself to a

world that had outgrown religious belief, embraced the poet's task of fashioning powerful but fictive meanings—offering what he termed, with characteristic wit and ambiguity, “notes toward a supreme fiction.” At least that is the customary portrait of the two artists, in which case it's not surprising that most Christians have unhesitatingly sided with Eliot.

Beckett admires Eliot's poetry, but she can't ignore the pinched and desperate quality of his faith, which was rooted more in disgust with the world and himself than in a grateful, humble appreciation of God's grace. Eliot, she concludes, was a “shutter-out, a chilling excluder.” Stevens, by contrast, was fed by an inexhaustible love of the earth and its beauty and was always open to the possibility that the source of his own imagination was a transcendent presence that was fashioning him, even as he sought that presence. It is Stevens, Beckett suggests, whose poetic work is more closely aligned with an Augustinian love of God. And it is not insignificant for Beckett that in the year before his death, while in the hospital for exploratory surgery, Stevens was received into the Catholic Church.

Writing in a brisk, authoritative style, Beckett is able in a few sentences to overturn conventional critical opinion. Her 40 pages on modern literature from D. H. Lawrence to Saul Bellow, which focus on the impossibility of replacing religion with art (the modern project), are worth a dozen volumes on the topic. And it would be hard to think of a more probing introduction to the religious themes of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky than the essay in this volume.

Occasionally Beckett can be polemically Catholic, especially when treating English authors. She is herself an English Catholic (for many years she taught at Ampleforth College, a Benedictine school near York) and is acutely aware of her country's long history of anti-Catholic policies and prejudices. She is particularly caustic on the muddled theological tradition of Anglicanism and on English Protestant writers' ignorance of Catholic teachings (an ignorance that does not prevent them from expressing fervent “anti-popish” sentiments). Nevertheless, she offers lovely, admiring portraits of George Herbert, John Donne and Samuel Johnson. An unexpected English hero of the book is Samuel Coleridge, whom she treats as a profoundly Christian writer—not at all a Romantic—and a much more important figure than his untrustworthy friend, William Wordsworth, who was a talented but self-absorbed “eccentric deist.”

Beckett can't write a dull sentence. Those who read even a few pages of this book will find their mind sharpened and their moral seriousness deepened.