Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo, by David Toole

reviewed by Miroslav Volf in the October 7, 1998 issue

By David Toole, Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse. *(Westview, 352 pp.)*

The subtitle conveys more about the content of this book than the title. David Toole says something about Susan Sontag's staging of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo during the recent war in Bosnia, but almost nothing about the city itself. His Sarajevo is not so much a geographic location as a metaphor for the Enlightenment. The ruins of Sarajevo are the ruins of Enlightenment dreams.

Though it is easy to see why Toole chose this metaphor, I do not agree that "the Balkans and a war where Christians and Muslims kill one another" is the best place to go to "refute the Enlightenment dream of a universal humanity endowed with a single reason, embodying a single morality." It is certainly no more apt a place than many American inner cities or, for that matter, Parisian or London living rooms. In any case, Toole's main concern is to explore the metaphysics and politics "adequate to the task of living the good life" in the face of his belief that the Enlightenment dreams will remain forever unfulfilled.

The central figures in the book are Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault and John Howard Yoder. With the help of John Milbank's work, Toole quickly dismisses nihilism, and reads (in partial disagreement with Milbank) Nietzsche and Foucault as representatives of "tragedy" and Yoder as representative of "apocalypse." Toole casts human lives "within an apocalyptic frame" but also suggests that some moments in our lives may be tragic, "since some of the paths we walk are simply paths of dissonance that have yet to be resolved back into harmony." He immediately adds, "Maybe. Perhaps. Nothing is certain." But does this uncertainty fit within an apocalyptic framework? Only if one reads--mistakenly, I think--the meaning of the Christian "apocalypse" as embodied in the slain lamb, "who took up the cross and not the crown," rather than "who conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Rev. 3: 21).

Though it was originally written as a dissertation, the book reads well. However, some readers will be annoyed at occasionally being treated as freshman students,

as when they are told, "You should [now] also be able at least to begin to see . . ." The most valuable part of the book comes near the end, in the extended conversation between the tragic politics of Foucault and the apocalyptic politics of Yoder. Toole does here something that has, surprisingly, not been done before: he draws on Foucault as a constructive resource "to illuminate the character of resistance in the life and death of Jesus and in the early Christian communities" and thus to suggest a shape for Christian social engagement in the contemporary world.