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Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Beholding the Glory - Incarnation Through the Arts. Editor, Jeremy Begbie. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000) xv, 160 pages, paperback. Reviewed by Simon du Toit, Professor of Theatre Arts, Dordt College.

In his introduction to this collection of essays, Jeremy Begbie points out the usefulness of the arts as vehicles of discovery. Begbie is the director of Theology Through the Arts, a research project at the Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies at the University of Cambridge in England. His celebration of the arts as ways of knowing seems particularly current and appropriate at a time when concerns about the nature of communication, or signification as some would have it, and its role in culture formation are so very prevalent. In the struggles over theory of the last two decades, two major areas of concern have clearly emerged: the relation between language and meaning, and the nature and role of the human body. These essays offer fresh perspective on both issues by approaching through the arts the human physicality of the Word made flesh.

Begbie's stated project is to develop a fresh view of Christ's incarnation using structural principles and specific examples drawn from various art-forms. As such, this collection of essays attempts to straddle a theoretical gulf between theology and the arts that has sometimes seemed to be insuperable. The suspicion of the church for the arts has been matched by the arts' disdain for and resentment of religion; to this day, relations between the two are at best cautious. Christians who work in the arts will find this collection refreshing and inspiring. Begbie acknowledges the book's limitations, which cut two ways. From the artist's point of view, not all the arts are represented, and they are discussed mostly with reference to work of the twentieth century. While opening many hopeful theological possibilities, these essays don't claim to be comprehensive. From the theologian's point of view, the mystery of the incarnation is presented in a rich, fresh manner, but is not developed into a substantial or univocal theology. Many variant voices are here represented; indeed, that is one of Begbie's points of pride. For him, theology is broad enough to include plural perspectives.

The collection was clearly written sequentially. Many chapters refer specifically to comments made earlier. While this approach gives the book coherence and a sense of thrust, it might occasionally bemuse the reader, as the writers of the later chapters seem to have enjoyed a certain critical advantage. However, the first in the sequence, Trevor Hart's paper "Hearing, Seeing

and Touching the Truth," speaks from a theological perspective about overarching aesthetic matters, and thus serves as a useful touchstone for what follows.

Hart moves early to establish his concerns. He calls for a theological reconsideration of the arts, and traces briefly the views of the arts held by philosophers and theologians in history. As he points out, the Protestant tradition has often viewed the products of the imagination as secondary kinds of knowledge at best. The arts, however, can provide us with startling and penetrating views of the mystery of Jesus' incarnation. Hart examines the rationalist view of the arts as untrustworthy and transgressive, a view that traces its provenance through Kant back to Platonic forms and particulars. Plato regarded *poesis* as fakery; Hume called artists "liars by profession." The kernel of the problem lies in symbolization; the arts are grounded in physical particulars, and use symbolization to transfigure the commonplace. This intellectualized view of art has been held even by successful artists such as Schoenberg and Kandinsky. Gradually, the locus of artistic experience has been driven deeper into our inner mental experience, and materiality has come to be regarded as unhelpful dross to be shucked off.

In connecting this discussion with a view of the incarnation, Hart identifies two issues. First, what are the implications of art's aspirations to creativity for its relations to truth and meaning? Second, what is the relation of art to the physical? Hart then connects those questions with analogous questions in Christology, and makes two claims: first, that the incarnation grants warrant to imaginative creativity, and second, that artistic imagination may cast light on the mystery of the Word become Flesh. Hart stresses the theological centrality of Christ's full humanity, revisiting the words of the Greek fathers of the fourth century: ". . . in order for God to transfigure our broken humanity it was necessary for him to lay hold of it in all its brokenness, and not to 'assume' some other, problem-free humanity instead" (20).

The importance of the notion of the fleshly reality of Jesus for the remaining chapters in the book cannot be overstated. One after another, each of the authors lay hold of the terrain Hart has staked out, covering repeatedly the grounding idea of the importance of Christ's work in and through the particulars of history. Each

uses the central idea that the particular man, Christ, is also the transcendent form, God with us, Emmanuel. God's activity in history is therefore inescapably relational, and dialogic, calling for a response from His people.

Malcolm Guite provides the second chapter, a view of the incarnation through literature. The chapter opens by quoting Edwin Muir's poem *The Incarnate One*, a poem that, in part, attacks Calvinist culture's condemnation of human imagination. However off-putting some readers may find that, the chapter remains a strong argument for the usefulness of literature in approaching the mystery of the incarnation. For Guite also, salvation is not from the flesh, but of the flesh. Thus he builds a theological connection with the arts, which can never be discarnate. Guite meditates thoughtfully on the wordedness of the flesh, seeing in it a countervailing force to the postmodern view of the inexhaustible separation between the sign and its referent. Guite uses poetry, and the meditations of poets on the slipperiness of language, to recognize the instability of the particular; yet he also points out that Jesus learned and used language in all its particularity. Though Guite makes the familiar claim that literature is especially fitted to link our here-and-now stories with Christ's once-for-all story, his chapter is strong, making fresh and convincing arguments for the importance of careful attention to the particular.

Given the strength of Guite's work, the following chapter by Andrew Rumsey is disappointing; focusing as it does on poetry, it has little to add to Guite's comments. Rumsey's discussion of William Carlos Williams' poem *The Red Wheelbarrow* is illuminating, as is his notion of "attention"; but on the whole his argument echoes previous ideas.

Sara Savage's chapter on dance establishes the notion of "person-knowledge" as a kind of knowledge that is grounded in physicality. As she points out, this knowledge is no mere gesture. Person-knowledge of Jesus is "intrinsic to salvation itself." Savage, like Hart, briefly recapitulates church history, this time with a focus on the place, or lack of it, given to the human body. Too often immobility has been equated with spirituality, and the body viewed as the unruly container of the mind. If the mind is different in substance from the body, how are we to fully know the person of Jesus? And why did God allow Jesus to know us fully, in a human body? Savage touches briefly on the problematization of the body as object of control, as expressed in much contemporary work on gender study. Her central point remains that through dance, we may know more of ourselves,

and therefore also may come to know more of Christ.

The fifth chapter by Jim Forest on knowing Christ through icons was for me the weakest in the book. Forest's historical and theological references are weakly stated and poorly developed. The chapter remained an apologia for icons, without substantially furthering the discussion of either Christology or aesthetic theory.

Chapter Six, then, offered a welcome richness of both style and content. Lynn Aldrich's view of sculpture and the incarnation is offered in a beguilingly clear, intelligent voice. Aldrich is quite comfortable with the vocabulary of postmodern criticism, and well armed to respond to it from a stance informed by the Gospel. We follow her on a journey through a series of artworks—sculptures, poems, cars, cities, and camels—to the revelation of the presence of God in the physical particular. In Aldrich's work the sense of the physical is palpably shared, offering a new view of God's creative work, forming Adam from the clay of the earth in Genesis 2:7.

Graham Cray's Chapter Seven approaches the incarnation through the perspective of popular music. Cray also is conversant with the postmodern undermining of meaning in language, and offers the bridging notion that culture does shape meaning, while resisting the idea that meaning is entirely constructed. As the modernist separation of "high" and "popular" culture has eroded, Cray takes license to explore the incarnation using the life and work of R&B singer Marvin Gaye. While the reader may find that an unsettling approach, Cray is able to make it work at least as compelling Christian music criticism, if not as theology.

Begbie closes the book with his own chapter, viewing the incarnation through music theory. Beginning with comments on the nature of meaning and language, Begbie skillfully develops an argument that music, through its capacity for harmony, can offer a paradigm that helps us escape the apparent binary contradiction of Jesus' dual nature as both fully God and fully human. His review of the theological history of that apparent paradox is useful, especially resonating as it does with the material of the previous chapters. His analogy of the way musical notes fill space is compelling, and his writing style is the most lucid in the book.

This book assumes the role of bridge builder between theology and the arts, and points the way to undiscovered country on both sides. As such it is very useful; many of the essays in the book are provocative and authoritative. For those who take it as their task to ground a view of the arts in a clear biblical worldview, there is much of merit to recommend.