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Christian Theology: An Introduction (Book Review)

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and Christian understandings of dialogue; Alan Jacobs' discussion of imagination in the light of developments in Psychological criticism and his interrogation of Deconstruction with *shalom* and *kerygma*; Michael Vander Weele's giving due to Louise Rosenblatt in his discussion of Reader-Response; and Susan Van Zanten Gallagher's balanced portrait of Feminist theory in the context of Christian concerns for justice.

Thirdly, these essays are, quite rightly, critical of Christian scholarship's relative silence in these debates. As Walhout announces in his introduction, "Among the many voices that have been clamoring for the attention of literary theorists and teachers during the last several decades, one of the weakest, or most ignored, has been that of Christianity" (vii). Walhout then proceeds to outline the reasons: scholars who skim what they want off debates; those who accept the dichotomy between private belief and the public activities of teaching and scholarship, who see religious experience in narrow rather than broadly cultural terms; and those quite simply intimidated, uncertain, or distrustful of the whole business. The whole volume, then, works to beat hiding Christian scholars out of the bushes and challenge them with awareness, even with entering the debate. Thus, Walhout argues that "if there is a viable Christian alternative to existing theories, it must begin with a full awareness of the issues and controversies that concern all theorists" (ix-x); indeed, "what is needed is a full participation in the contests—not a clearing of the decks, not a cantankerous sultanism, not an obsequious self-abnegation, not disillusioned retreat, but a serious, thoughtful, sensitive, and at times even jocular engagement with one's fellow players, both Christian and non-Christian" (ix).

Clearly, *Contemporary Literary Theory* is much more than descriptive or prescriptive. It demands

engagement and reflection, reflection on what lies within and behind our reading and teaching of literature, we as teachers and students and readers immersed in postmodern culture. This book challenges the easy and comfortable gap between practice and theory, arguing that the gap is too cosy for many Christian readers, practically and spiritually and pedagogically. As Vanden Bosch reminds us in his essay on Moral Criticism, "even if they don't consciously intend to do so, professors provide their students with regular, if unsystematic, lessons in criticism" (60). Because such lessons happen all the time, the theory-practice connection is crucial to the Christian reader. For this reason, Mark Walhout's bookend essay "Critical Theory" is central to the book. What is critical theory, he asks? Is it really an attempt to govern or control practice or interpretation with a system of thought? (279) It is (or should be) instead "just what critics do when they reflect on their practice" (284). Walhout then proceeds to suggest that the task of the Christian theorist (and I would argue all Christian readers) is "to develop a *theory of critical orthopraxis*, in which 'theory' means not the attempt to dominate practice but rather reflection on practice in the light of belief" (289-90). This is a compelling thought, indeed, for it makes the theorist the servant he or she should be, not the master he or she too often strives to be.

Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal is a challenging collection that gives its readers the tools needed to accept the challenge. The various writers here help writers, readers, teachers, and students of literature (even confused, intellectually arrogant doctoral students) become more obedient, humble, and awe-struck participants in the dialogue, whether the dialogue be about sliding signifiers or the Word and hats.

Christian Theology: An Introduction, by Alister E. McGrath (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994). 503 pages. \$59.95, Hardback. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Associate Professor of Theology.

The title and introductory materials of this book are a bit misleading. Both suggest that the work is a primer in theology. The preface even claims that the work is "comprehensive" in its task of introducing the neophyte into the theological discipline. Everything that the beginner needs to begin the study of theology is found here (xvii). False. At best, what McGrath has done here is give a descriptive analysis of a single branch of Christian theology: the history of Christian dogmatics. The section on systematic theology (part 3) is a replay of the historical section (part 1) poured through the grid of the classical theological loci. What is most obviously lacking here is any concerted attention upon Scripture and biblical theology. Telling the

Christian story via its heritage of great thinkers is a worthy exercise, but the great theologians attend to the text. McGrath has not done as they did and do. He has merely reported their theological conclusions.

As I said, recounting the doctrinal heritage of the church is a noble enterprise. McGrath is right to stress historical theology as he does. Listening to the church's past struggles with its faith and its detractors powerfully subverts all notions that theology is a static thing, something which exists in Scripture simply awaiting our discovery, and that humans beings and their thoughts exist outside of an historical matrix that influences them (121). Attending to both their theological constructs and the historical cir-

cumstances that give rise to their theologies forces us to come to admit that we too are historically and culturally conditioned.

Understanding that a conversation with the wisdom of the ages is basic to and prior to a faithful present contextualization of the Gospel. But Scripture is prior to tradition—no matter whether one understands tradition as either creed or ecclesiastical heritage—for tradition must always be ready to listen to the critique of Scripture. A church that attends only to its historical heritage, and thinks that that heritage is the sum total of its doctrinal concern, will have nothing to guard itself against confessionalism (the absolutization of a particular community's articulation of the gospel teaching). In claiming to be theologically comprehensive, McGrath leaves his readers with the sense that the study of the history of Christian thought is the study of theology, and that that history is all there is to theology. Surely most people who have taken a battery of courses in theology have taken at least one course in which the focus was not historical theology. Aside from ignoring the vast and crucial fields of biblical and systematic theology, presenting historical theology as the sum of the theological concern further suggests that theology is locked up in the past.

I wish I could say that the work fails as a comprehensive introduction to the breadth of theological study but serves well to introduce the student to the field of historical theology. But the book falls short here as well.

Hendrikus Berkoﬀ believes that a purely descriptive approach to theology is grossly inadequate. One never moves beyond describing the beliefs of others. Berkoﬀ insists that he as a Christian theologian must add his own belief, for only then is he involved in the theological enterprise. To do less is "a failure of nerve." Writing in the very same volume (*Roundtable: Conversations with European Theologians*), McGrath seems to agree. He also bemoans the arid, allegedly neutral, descriptive theology of the university. Positively, the theologian's role is one of profession. He is called to profess Christ. Critically, the theologian is called to call a lie a lie, to discern what is contrary to Christ and name it by its true name. In short, the theologian is an advocate for the Gospel, an active participant in the Christian tradition.

Unfortunately, in the work before us, McGrath opts for just the descriptive approach that he seems to criticize the modern university for propogating. He consciously steers away from prescribing what the reader should believe, and aims instead to explain what has been believed so that the reader can then make up his or her own mind.

I appreciate the pedagogical concern. McGrath does not want to dictate to his reader. His purpose is rather to introduce the student to the theological discussion (xv). Yet, McGrath never does any theology here. He merely

records the theologies of others. Our theology cannot merely repeat the content of the past. Considering the biblical norm, the history of theological construction, and the present context, a responsible Christian theology is what we must say to our generation on the basis of God's revelation and its historical interpretation.

McGrath believes that he is enabling his readers to build their own theologies by providing them with historical examples which then operate as options for present theological construction. Under each major locus McGrath presents models, ways in which different thinkers have understood the Holy Spirit or Jesus Christ or what have you. While he does point out strengths and weaknesses of the models, the approach is still purely descriptive. There is precious little to recommend the theology of Calvin over that of Schleiermacher, or I should say, Calvin's understanding of the trinity over that of Schleiermacher. McGrath's loci division has a way of carving a theologian's thought into discreet themes that can be placed alongside another person's statements on the same theme. The loci method is counterproductive for contextual and historical analysis. Three-fifths of the book is given over to this ahistorical methodology for studying historical theology. This is not to say that historical theology cannot be done thematically. It most certainly can. But the historian of theology must work very carefully when using such devices. Extra care must be given to historical context, relationships, and influences—care that McGrath did not invest here.

The modelling approach also creates the idea that doing theology is like visiting a mall and purchasing whatever suits your fancy. The student is provided with a series of models under the doctrine of God, trinity, person of Christ, soteriology, human nature, and so on, and he can mix and match pretty much as he sees fit. To change the metaphor, theology is like putting together a great puzzle. But nothing in McGrath's approach stops the reader from putting pieces together from very different puzzles, or even suggests that there might be some danger to such an approach. Its all a multiple choice quiz in which all answers appear equally valid.

A colleague of mine (at another school) is using *Christian Theology* as a textbook in an introductory historical theology course. While he admits that the modelling approach is weak, and notes that the book is historiographically simplistic, he maintains that there is a clear strength in the book. Since the work has no clear sustained argument, it functions as a resource that does not get in the way of the lectures. In other words, the students will read little that the professor will have to unteach them. For \$59.99, one ought to expect more than that. From someone of Alister McGrath's reputation, we should expect far more.