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Psychology of Religion (Book Review)

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music is good.

Currently Chairman of the Music Department at Calvin College, Topp previously was a Christian school music teacher and a director of church choirs. His book reflects his background. As he discusses the philosophy of music, he constantly applies his ideas to real-life, practical situations. The book is filled with usable guidelines, suggestions, options, and ideas. Extensive chapters are devoted to music in the Christian church, home, and school. A great diversity of topics is covered, ranging from selecting a church organ or choosing a private music teacher for your child to proper use of a pitchpipe.

Additional themes stand out in the book. Topp calls for complete honesty and candor in dealing with fellow Christians. He stresses Ephesians 4:15 ("...speaking the truth in love") as a prescription for growth in the body of Christ. Topp emphasizes that this honesty must be coupled with encouragement and understanding. He also stresses the need for open-mindedness by both music leaders and "consumers" (listeners, congregation, etc.) When differences of opinion exist, there must be a willingness on both sides to "build bridges." Another theme is planning. Music should not be used haphazardly; its use in church or school should be governed by established policies, goals, and objectives.

Dr. Topp calls for Christians to take a genuine interest in music, to be convinced of its value, to be open minded, to be aware of the meaning and appropriateness of words, and to make decisions upon Scripturally-based principles. His book can be helpful to Christian music leaders, pastors, laymen, and teachers. Music in the Christian Community is a comprehensive, yet concise, handbook. It fills a real need in the Christian community and deserves a wide reading.

Psychology of Religion, by Wayne Oates, Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1973. Reviewed by Rich Buckham, Instructor in Psychology.

This is the twenty-first book of Oates, a professor in the Psychology of Religion at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who has written extensively in the area of pastoral psychology and counseling.

In nineteen chapters, Oates attempts to

consider (apparently most of) the viewpoints on the various issues in the "psychology of religion." This is especially evident in the chapters on the definition of religion, the psychological roots of religion, the psychology of religious development, conversion, sin and forgiveness, and "toward a psychology of faith." Although these particular comparative analyses are valuable in themselves, Oates often seems to be syncretic in his own summary positions.

Other chapters critique such phenomena as mysticism and the life of the spirit, prayer and non-verbal communication, sleep, dreams and revelation, habit and religious ritual, loyalty and conscience, commitment and alienation, decision-making and responsibility, ecstasy and the non-rational (are we too rationalistic in our our faith-life?), and religion and psychopathology.

The subject matter of the above chapters pretty well covers the traditional field of investigation of the "psychology of religion." Even though Oates sometimes does not adequately conceptualize or give an adequate perspective on each of the phenomena dealt with, the phenomena themselves are certainly of high interest and worthy of serious attention. After all, the above phenomena are of the warp and woof of the Christian's life and are often more salient in that life than questions of doctrine or polity. This book offers a broad overview of the many facets of such Christian experience and is a useful introduction to that study.

Finally, a few comments about his first chapter, "Definitions of Religion." In this chapter Oates considers misconceptions about religion, a Biblical view of religion (mainly word studies of the Latin persona, religio, and various Hebrew terms used with respect to the whole man, such as "heart"—some noteworthy points here), and various philosophical and psychological definitions of religion. It is not clear whether "religion" for Oates is merely a dimension of (some?) men's lives or the very condition and matrix of all men's lives. Further, Oates apparently wants to take a psychological approach to defining religion and the totality of man's religious experience. But one might ask if such a scientific definition and analysis can be made of man's relationship with God in-itself or only of the various experiences and actions that reflect that relationship. That is, is there such a thing as the psychology of religion?