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Review of Personal Jesus

Jeremy Begbie
A downside to this book marks much writing on church architecture – a lack of plans and pictures. Though a small selection is placed at the tail end of the penultimate chapter, no reference to them is made in the preceding discussion. Unless you know the architects and churches covered, it would be helpful to have a computer close by. You would be likely to understand Price’s argument much more fully.

Accomplishing its goal, this book draws the reader towards appreciating this much-maligned period in church architecture. Those interested in the history of church architecture and the Liturgical Movement, or involved in a church building project, will find this book helpful and enjoyable. Living as we do in the midst of another shift in worship and architectural styles, by understanding the motivations, values and failures of this earlier period, we may find our own answer to what a relevant and faithful church building looks like today.

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This engaging study is the most substantial book on theology and popular music yet to appear: it has a theological seriousness lacking in earlier treatments; it is one of the few to take account of current developments in music theory; and it manages to take proper account of the wider field of popular culture studies.

In recent years, much music theory has shifted from a focus on ‘the work’ (the piece of music as a ‘text’), or on composition (e.g. the composer’s intentions), to a renewed interest in *reception*: what you and I actually do with music, and what it does to us. Marsh and Roberts align very much with this new approach. And they do so with theological antennae: their concern is with how the act of music-listening might function in a religion-like way.

They map their findings around four key themes: transcendence, embodiment, connectedness and ritual. And they argue that popular music can help to re-construe such major doctrines as incarnation, church and sacraments. The range of examples is wide – from Lady Gaga to U2, Bob Dylan to Sigur Róís. Many common traps are avoided – such as an over-emphasis on lyrics, and simple transmission theories of communication. In the final chapter the authors offer down-to-earth exhortations to churches, educators, the academy, the ordinary listener, and to those involved in media and cultural life.

Although the argument is long and tends to fold back on itself too often, the book marks a new stage in its field. If the discussion is to advance, however, some critical weaknesses need addressing. First, theologically, the tone is unstintingly generous, but, like many attempts to discern ‘what God is doing in the world’,
there is a notable absence of any sustained treatment of the cross and its implications for how the Church goes about engaging culture. Second, the discussion is concerned with ‘conscious practice’ – music as chosen, not with music that affects us without our knowing it: hence the prominence given to the ‘listener’ and ‘dedicated listening’. The problem here is that a huge amount of popular music is not ‘listened to’. The authors fully acknowledge this. But arguably, in order to do justice to the music they do consider, much more attention needs to be given to the broader picture. After all, much religious music – for example, hymn-singing – does not involve ‘listening’ (at least not in any ordinary sense), and, in any case, the ‘music-listener’ is a fairly recent and local figure in cultural history. Third, the term ‘popular’ needs far more interrogation: so much of what is said here could apply to music not labelled as such. Fourth, I longed for more historical awareness. The ‘popular music’ of the 1950s and 1960s did not spring up out of nowhere, but has roots stretching back centuries, and a huge scholarship on its precursors is there for the taking.

Having said all this, Marsh and Roberts have issued a challenge that can hardly be ignored, and they have raised the quality of the theological debate about popular music to a new level.

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