Review of 'Poetic Theology' by William A. Dyrness

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Imagine a representative sample of 21st century, middle-class Americans – one man loves football, one woman enjoys painting, a couple spend their leisure time skiing and another is passionate about fishing. These pastimes are not traditionally ‘religious’ but for many people, William A. Dyrness argues, such pursuits: ‘have taken the place of religious activities’ (p 5).

From this everyday observation the author teases out some of the striking historical and theological implications of these changes to what might be called ‘Western piety’. In Dyrness’ view the ‘Romantic inward turn’ provides dramatic challenges to Christian faith generally and Christian theology specifically, which can only be addressed by a more profound understanding of the way ‘aesthetics extends to all areas of our embodied and encultured life’ (p 11). At heart, he believes the contemporary culture with which Christianity has to connect is one that is motivated by the aesthetics of desire and, although there are clearly dangers inherent in this respect, there are also many positive opportunities if people of faith seek to engage constructively with this change. Dyrness sees ‘poetic theology’ as key to this process.

His book is divided into three parts: (i) The Method of Poetic Theology; (ii) The Building Blocks for a Poetic Theology; and (iii) The Trajectory of Poetic Theology – with a concluding section summarizing his case and making ten chapters in all. After setting out his introductory ‘prelude’, Dyrness begins his historical analysis of how the present situation has arisen. The term *Theologia poetica* comes from the 15th century humanist Pico della Mirandola who was seeking to reconcile Christian thought with the classical tradition. In this respect Mirandolla was standing on a trajectory which extended back through Dante to Augustine and Aristotle and forward through John Calvin to Philip Sidney and Jacques Maritain. Across this historical perspective, Dyrness argues that different forms of *theologia poetica* take seriously the idea that the symbolic spaces created by various forms of cultural expression reflect the unspoken and sometimes unspeakable longings in which lie the hidden collective and individual symbols for people’s lives. This is reflected in forms that are self-consciously ‘high art’ but also in more unreflective pastimes such as painting, skiing, fishing or following football. In setting out what he calls his
poetic stewardship of life he refers to Charles Taylor’s recent work on ‘the social imaginary’; Ricoeur’s description of emplotment; together with Milbank’s and von Balthasar’s ideas on beauty; arguing that God is present in such experiences and that the Christian life of faith should involve the ‘aesthetics of becoming’.

The second part of the volume explores in more detail the historical background to this process of becoming. To begin with Dyrness examines the Romantic heritage of Kant and Schleiermacher particularly as developed by Tillich and C. S. Lewis, with a view to providing a strong theological framework for his approach to aesthetics. He finds this best expressed by the Orthodox writer David Bentley Hart’s *The Beauty of the Infinite* (2003). This leads into an analysis of how aesthetics were explored in the 20th century by Maritain, von Balthasar, Gunton and others.

Having laid this foundation Dyrness proceeds to build a distinctly Reformed approach to aesthetics by examining the work of Bunyan and Calvin. He argues for a re-awakening of the Protestant imagination and an opening of the doors of the Church to God’s creative presence in the world. All of which leads into the third part and a passionate appeal for churches to rediscover the symbolic and aesthetic richness of the Christian faith and that such a rediscovery should, in turn, relate to human and social transformation. His conclusion examines briefly how this approach to *theologia poetica* might impact upon such theological concepts as creation, Christology and eschatology.

This is a most stimulating volume, which – whilst remaining true to its roots in the Reformed Church – is always willing to enter into dialogue with Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and other traditions. As Dyrness himself acknowledges, this book is to some extent a prolegomena and further work needs to be done on the more detailed conversation between our embodied experience of culture and specific theological concepts. He is aware of this and other challenges, e.g. finding an aesthetic of Christ’s suffering. Thus he observes, ‘Christians cannot be united with Christ and celebrate the joy of his resurrection without being thrust back into the struggle of the cross … Here is where our aesthetic theology seems to meet its greatest challenge, but perhaps also where it realizes its greatest potential. How can one look into this darkness and
I very much look forward to seeing how this fascinating conversation between theology and the aesthetics of everyday life develops in his future work.

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