

BOOK REVIEWS

REEL SPIRITUALITY: THEOLOGY AND FILM IN DIALOGUE

ROBERT K JOHNSTON

(Baker Academic, Michigan, 2000; ISBN 0-8010-2241-X; 236pp; \$16.99)

The increasing range of publications from the United States on cinema/theology/spirituality from authors like Robert Jewett, Richard Blake, Peter Frazer, Bryan P. Stone and Sarah Anson Vaux is very encouraging. There have been several studies of how the churches, especially the Catholic Church via the Legion of Decency, opposed a great deal of moviemaking in the earlier twentieth century (Gregory Black, James Skinner, Frank Walsh). It is time now to highlight how the churches have responded positively to cinema, appreciating how film actually works on a practical and an aesthetic level, and entering into dialogue about values, social issues and the search for spirituality.

Robert K Johnston believes in this dialogue. Theology, he reminds us, is conversation about God. He wants film to be part of that conversation.

For many Christians, however, this conversation with film remains partial, both naïve in its judgements and disconnected from our faith and beliefs. How can we enter into the conversation with Hollywood in a way that goes beyond bumperstickers and sloganeering? How can we engage this alternate form of storytelling, both emotionally and intellectually? (p. 14)

The author is in a particularly helpful position to answer these questions and invite us to answer them with him. He lectures in film and theology at Fuller Theological Seminary outside Los Angeles. He reviews movies for *The Covenant Companion*. He is associated with many seminar groups and with the Festival of the City of Angels. He knows the American cinema and spirituality scene

and is able to guide the reader, in the earlier chapters, through the opinions and stances of writers and speakers like Michael Medved and Margaret Miles.

He is versed in theology. Of special interest is his ecumenical breadth. His chapter on "Theological Approaches to Film Criticism" not only highlight the evangelical tradition but offers a critique with reference to its over-reliance on the tradition of word (and the use of voiceover in movies) and the Catholic tradition of images and icons and the impact of cinema images without verbal explanation or context (p. 74–78). This is a fruitful area for dialogue.

He is versed in film. He urges Christians in dialogue with cinema to appreciate the aesthetics of film and not simply rush to judgement with a priori moral stances. He adds several schemas to his text to indicate approaches that are both theoretical and practical. And he puts this into practice as he includes studies of particular films throughout the book, emphasising the role and impact of storytelling on audiences. This is where he dialogues with his readers.

As the president of the International Catholic Organisation for Cinema (OCIC), I was especially pleased to read *Reel Spirituality*. The members of OCIC would subscribe to its outlook on the dialogue between cinema and theology. Conversations about God in the context of movies are important to us.

Peter Malone

GOD'S JUST VENGEANCE TIMOTHY GORRINGE

(Cambridge University Press 1996; ISBN 0521557623; 294pp; £17.99)

The Christian Church has always had live with an uncomfortable question: what is the relationship between its

own doctrines – and the interpretation of them – and the way in which those who break the law are punished? It is a question that the Church has successfully dodged for much of its history. At a time when policies and opinions about the treatment of offenders are exercising the public imagination, the Church does well to remind itself that much of what it believes about the death of Jesus Christ, and the way this belief has developed over time, has a significant bearing on the way offenders are treated.

In this comprehensive study, Gorringe seeks to demonstrate the connections between penal substitutionary theories of the atonement and the historical development of penal policy. The bulk of the book is an exploration of history, theology, public policy and human experience. The primary biblical and doctrinal sources are examined thoroughly, and illustrated with contemporaneous examples of pastoral practice as well as the prevailing penal code. Thus, with the flowering of popular devotion to the crucified Christ in the Middle Ages, for example, and the appearance of pivotal works such as Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?* and Aquinas' *Summa Theologia*, with their respective understandings of the good order of society and the nature of sin, we discover both the genesis of public acts of atonement in the modern world alongside attempts (supremely represented by the work of Abelard) to articulate a much broader – and humane – understanding of the relationship between the doctrine of atonement and the penal code. As Gorringe demonstrates through his consideration of subsequent periods of history, this broader understanding took over half a millennium to become effective.

Gorringe identifies the 1895 Gladstone Report as a turning

point in British policy, and its enabling of a short-lived shift from retribution to rehabilitation to inform penal policy. The failure of wider, related social policies signalled a swift return to a retributive stance (a fact which ought not be lost on those who currently seek to be "tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime"!)

This pattern needs to be viewed against developments in atonement theology during the course of the twentieth century. Gorringe identifies, for example, works as recent as Colin Gunton's *The Actuality of the Atonement* (1988) which argues for the continued importance of a penal substitutionary view of the atonement because "there can be no restoration of relationships unless the nature of the offence against universal justice is laid bare and attacked at its root" (p. 230)

The author argues that if penal policy is to find a new direction for the effective treatment of offenders, and its relationship to a broad understanding of atonement theology, there needs to be a much stronger correlation between our understanding of crime, society and forgiveness. He recognises that forgiveness is both an ecclesial and societal phenomenon, and that an emphasis on inclusion rather than exclusion is a more adequate, synoptic expression of atonement theology (citing Moltmann, for example). If the notion of the scapegoat is, somehow, sub-Christian, why does society and the Church (which proclaims that the crucified has rendered the scapegoat redundant) allow its continued manifestation in those it imprisons?

There are huge issues here related to the collapse of meaningful expressions of society and community, as well as a challenge to the Church in its task of recovering this sense of community. The resolution, argues Gorringe, may be found in a rigorous sacramental ►

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► praxis, in which there is a fundamental recognition that Christ did not bequeath doctrines to his Church but a community founded on his betrayal which survived betrayal.

This book is not simply a contribution to the continuing debate about the need for the reform of the penal system. It serves a vital missiological need. It is a timely reminder that, in the face of calls to recover the centrality of the Christian metanarrative for the recreation of society, that metanarrative demands as much critique as the policies it might shape.

Simon Reynolds

CHURCHGOING AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS ROBIN GILL

(Cambridge University Press 1999; ISBN 0521578280; 392 pp: £17.95)

This is an unusual book. Part of a series entitled *New Studies in Christian Ethics*, Gill is writing for a limited audience. It is a book full of technical data and debate and yet is surprisingly accessible to those who are not sociologists. He is addressing a particular issue relating to virtue ethics and yet much of the book is actually about his suggestion that there should be a cultural theory of churchgoing to place alongside the three other common theories.

So why should anyone be interested in this book other than those with a passion for virtue ethics and sociological theories? I would suggest that this is a useful book for people interested in three areas.

First, the question as to why church attendance has declined so seriously and persistently over many decades is a difficult issue which thinking Christians have found hard to grapple with. The two extreme views; that we are caught in the grip of powerful forces of secularisation and cultural change that we are unable to

combat or, alternatively, that we could easily change the situation if only we had the right methods for congregational development, are alluring and misleading. Gill offers some help in understanding the complex relationship between religious communities and the surrounding culture.

Second, the issue as to whether or not it does make a difference to belong to Christian communities in the realms of ethics is an important matter and deserves to be taken seriously. Gill offers powerful evidence that the relationship between certain ethical stances and the nurturing power of the Christian church is undeniable.

Third, that does raise the question as to what constitutes a nurturing Christian community. Here Gill is less convincing. He writes extensively about the role of hymnody and worship but says almost nothing about the use of the Bible. That is surprising given the work of Leslie Francis which points to Bible reading as more determinative of attitudes and behaviour than church attendance.

There may not be a polarisation between their views if one considers the role of Bible reading and Bible study in the formation of Christian community. For example, one could imagine that congregations with a high percentage of members meeting in mid-week study groups would produce communities that had more impact on ethics than congregations where opportunities for Christian formation were more limited. It seems to me that there is room for more work in this area. In the meantime Robin Gill provides some core data and theories to assist us in our own reflections on these matters.

Martin Robinson

SALVATION TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MISSION ANDREAS KOSTENBERGER & PETER O'BRIEN

(IVP 2001; ISBN 0851115195; 352 pp; £12.99)

The authors of this volume have faced a particularly unenviable task. On the one hand they have written a splendid volume in a much neglected area of study but on the other hand, they are writing to some extent under the shadow of David Bosch's wonderful book *Transforming Mission* which covers much of the same ground. Of course, since their emphasis is not as broad as Bosch and focuses entirely on the biblical material rather than the more sweeping historical survey of that author, they are able to tackle elements that he neglected. For example, Bosch entirely omitted a Johannine perspective in his study, which for many was a source of some regret.

I find this a useful book for two reasons. First, it offers a helpful corrective to the tendency to study the Bible with no regard for its missionary intent. The notion that the Bible is fundamentally a missionary document needs to be shouted from the rooftops. It actually makes little or no sense to discuss the text while somehow pretending that mission is not central to the concern of the writers of these texts.

Second, it is helpful as a resource to have major passages on mission available in a single volume. Those who write, preach, teach and think about mission will welcome this book as a study tool.

However, there is a need for some caution too. The subtitle indicates that this is a book that offers a biblical theology of mission. Unfortunately, in my view that is precisely where the book is at its weakest. It may offer a helpful discussion of key texts in relation to mission but to suggest that it represents a Biblical theology of mission is

optimistic to say the least. For example, there is both an explicit and implicit sense that mission is understood primarily as evangelism or proclamation.

While some scholars have gone too far in almost excluding the Church from the issue of mission, this volume goes too far in identifying mission exclusively with the Church. Of course the church has a vital and central role to play in the enterprise of mission but the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh and not just on all church members. Despite this core weakness, it is a book that I will want to consult on a frequent basis.

Martin Robinson

IN THE BEGINNING: THE STORY OF THE KING JAMES BIBLE ALISTER MCGRATH

(Hodder & Stoughton 2001; ISBN 0340 78560 8; 340pp; £14.99)

In the beginning was the word, and it was usually in Latin. Though in medieval times the Bible was supposed to be the bedrock of every Westerner's behaviour, its contents were judiciously meted out by priests to congregations either too ignorant to understand the Latin that was preached at them, or too cowed by clerical authority to question the accuracy of the texts they heard.

In a readable romp through the facts, the Reverend Alister McGrath, Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University, traces the fascinating but disturbing history of the Bible, from prized possession of the few to bestselling book in the world. The pivot he chooses is the King James Bible: its inception, its significance, its political and linguistic impact. Yet as this unevenly weighted and occasionally repetitive work unfolds, the greatest interest lies in the years preceding the King James Version. Few strands in European history are more revealing of the nature

religious power and the corrupt motives of those whose best interests were served by keeping the masses in the dark about the true nature of the Word of God.

McGrath starts from a position of awe for the beauty and honesty of the King James Bible. Without it, he writes, "there would have been no *Paradise Lost*, no *Pilgrim's Progress*, no Handel's *Messiah*, no Negro spirituals, no Gettysburg Address". Until the end of World War One, the Authorised Version was seen "as one of the finest works in the English language. It did not follow literary trends, it established them."

Many would echo this. Iris Murdoch, for instance, wrote: "These books have been loved because of their inspired linguistic perfection. Treasured words encourage, console, and save." Even the ramshackle James Boswell was enchanted by this Bible and wondered why so few people read it. "I am persuaded that those who have any genuine taste might be taken in to admire it exceedingly and so by degrees have a due value for the oracles of God."

The language of the King James Version has been set on par with Shakespeare as the most profound influence on the development of the English language, both in Britain and in its former colonies and America. So it comes as something of a surprise to discover that when it was first published, it was written in language which was already deemed old fashioned, and that for its first 150 years it was severely criticised by Puritans and Catholics. Only latterly has it gained the status of revered classic.

The path that led to this momentous translation was decidedly rocky. The first printed Bible – in Latin – came from the innovatory Gutenberg press in 1456 and cost the equivalent of a substantial German town house. Long

before this, however, in the late 14th century John Wycliffe in England had argued that the Bible should be translated into English, so ordinary educated people could read it for themselves. "Wycliffe thus threatened to destroy the whole edifice of clerical domination in matters of theology and church life. The translation of the Bible into English would be a social leveler on a hitherto unknown scale." One English chronicler's comments on Wycliffe's translation of the New Testament are typical of the times: "As a result, the pearls of the gospel have been scattered and spread before swine." You can almost hear him gasp when he realises it is now available "even to women who can read".

In a country where Latin and French were the spoken languages of the elite and English used only for talking to inferiors, English became the language of the religious underground. While Luther was proclaiming the need for his fellow countrymen to have the Bible in German, in England William Tyndale was ploughing a similar furrow with his translation of the New Testament, and later some of the Old Testament. Smuggled into England from Germany where it was printed, this vernacular version was the first real blow to the hegemony of the Church.

Ten years later, when the law caught up with him, Tyndale was executed. By this time, however, his felicitous translation had already caught on, and most subsequent English versions of the Bible leaned heavily on his. What we read in the King James Bible today is closely aligned to his work, with phrases such as "the powers that be", "my brother's keeper", and words like scapegoat and atonement coming directly from his pen.

Set amid the religious tensions of the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I and VI, the background to the King James Bible is as much of political expediency as

of spiritual devotion. When James came to the English throne in 1603, he had already suffered at the hands of Scottish Protestants, one of whom – Andrew Melville – alarmed him by half-choking him and calling him "God's silly vassal". Despite the hopes of English Puritans, he was no friend to severe Protestantism and its emphasis on the rights of individuals rather than the divine right of kings.

As has been noted already elsewhere in the press, McGrath fails to locate the origins of the King James Bible in the General Assembly of the Kirk in 1601, where at Burntisland the decision was taken to authorise a new translation. Instead, he skips this seemingly minor detail and places the birth of the idea at a conference between Anglicans and Puritans at Hampton Court in 1604. James's main aim was to eradicate the influence of the highly popular Geneva Bible. This had been written by exiles from Mary Tudor's Catholic wrath, and radically Protestant in its marginal notes which were intended to help readers understand the text. To prevent the production of a similarly dangerous work, James instructed the Archbishop of Canterbury, Richard Bancroft, to devise strict rules for the translation, which ensured that this version would be moderate and pro-monarch. Above all else, it was to be as close to earlier standard translations of the Bible as possible – thus leading, indirectly, back to Tyndale's original work, on which almost every version was based, yet for which he lost his life.

Using six teams, drawn from the intelligensia of southeast England, the new Bible was finally ready to print in 1611. At the time, it made little impact on the popularity of the Geneva Bible. Not until the Restoration of Charles II and of all things non-Puritan did the King James Bible come into its own. Then, at last, its fragrant language and scholarly translation gathered a devout following.

McGrath notes, with affection, that one of the great paradoxes of this translation is that "it achieved literary excellence precisely by choosing to avoid it... Aiming at truth, they achieved what later generations recognised as beauty and elegance." Indeed, this translation became so popular and so imbedded in the common mind that many forgot – or never appreciated that what they were reading was not the original text. In the words of one of its defenders, "If the King James Bible was good enough for St Paul, it's good enough for me".

By turns erudite and popular, serious and a little eccentric, *In the Beginning* is an efficient, though in places inadequate, skate across the dangerously thin ice that is the history of a religious grassroots revolution. At this remove it is difficult to appreciate the influence a translation could have on an uninformed readership. McGrath's achievement is to bring vividly to life the biography of an astounding body of work and remind us of what this now commonplace book has cost in lives and contributed in culture.

Rosemary Goring

This review first appeared in *Life & Work*, the magazine of the Church of Scotland.

THE REVIEWERS

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