

## APPRECIATING THE CREATURES' CREATIONS

- a response to

Leland Ryken, *The Christian Imagination, essays on literature and the arts*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981. 448 pp. Price not mentioned.

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*The Christian Imagination*, compiled by Leland Ryken, consists of thirty-nine essays by thirty-one authors on the relationship between Christians, Christianity and the arts.

The contributors range from the famous, such as C S Lewis and T S Eliot, to those who are not known outside their respective academic circles. The authors differ furthermore with respect to their confessional frame of reference. Flannery O'Connor is Catholic, Eliot and Lewis are "High" Anglican. On the other hand, there are authors of a distinct neo-Calvinistic orientation, as is evident in the essays of Nolan Huizinga and Leland Ryken. Ryken explicitly refers to the Dutch neo-Calvinist, Abraham Kuyper. H R Rookmaker, another contributor, taught at the Free University of Amsterdam, which was founded by Kuyper to further neo-Calvinistic ideas. The contributors also range from those who are critics only, to those who are artists in their own right, such as Eliot and Flannery O'Connor.

The quality of the essays differ as much. There is the classic "Religion and culture" by T S Eliot and three excellent articles by C S Lewis: "Christianity and culture"; "How the few and the many use pictures" and "How the few and the many use music". The figure of Lewis looms large indeed in this anthology. Apart from the essays written by him, at least three of the contributors are cited as having a special interest in Lewis, or having published articles on his work. Another incisive article is that by Nelvin Vos on "The religious meaning of comedy". But there are also articles which do not rise above the commonplace, such as Rolland N Hein's "A biblical view of the novel" and Steve J van der Weele's rather inadequate "Shakespeare and Christianity".

As an example of the superficiality in Hein's essay the following quote will suffice: "The fifth principle, then, is that the

manner of Christ is the perfect model for making moral judgements. Christ's manner was incisive yet kind, always penetrating to the heart of a matter, invariably seeing value where more obtuse minds did not. He always put the value of the individual first. He patiently understood the ungenerate mind" (p 261).

The trouble with Van der Weele's article is that he succumbs at the outset to a thought which he himself confesses to be "tantalizing": "It is always tantalizing for a Christian interested in literature to speculate about the question of whether Shakespeare was a Christian" (p 166). A few lines further on he writes: "And as for attempting to deduce Shakespeare's personal response towards the Christian faith from his writings, we are confronted with an almost impossible task". Indeed, an almost impossible task! A firm distinction must be made between the author in real life and the author as a construct of the text. In the fictional and metaphorical world of art it is impossible to equate the personal convictions of the writer with the voice or voices of his works. There is simply no direct link. However, quite apart from this specific characteristic of fictional language, a general fact should be kept in mind: we know how often it happens that somebody who professes to be a Christian, may live quite "un-christianly" in certain areas of his life. In the same way, the personal commitment to Christ by an author is no guarantee that he will in fact write Christian works. The "tantalizing" thought of Van der Weele is in fact a temptation which should be avoided. As Christian critics our task is to analyse works, not people! The assertion of the direct link between author and work does not belong in an anthology of this nature.

Confronted by so much diversity the thought arises: can there be one unifying vision in this anthology? The answer is "Yes", because all the essays give evidence of having solved the relationship between Christianity and art in the same way.

The way in which the relationship between the arts and Christianity is seen, is of course determined beforehand by a much larger theme, Christianity and culture. Art is, after all, fixed in the broad pattern of human living in relation to nature, fellow human beings, technology and God.

There are four (and only four?) possible relations between Christianity and culture:

The first option is that Christianity is seen as being completely antagonistic towards culture. The main reason why Christians

exist is to evangelize non-Christians. All arts, except those that can be used for evangelistic purposes, are demonically inspired. Jesus is the key to a blissful life after death. The aggressive condemnation of human culture can exhibit itself in acts such as the burning of books and artworks, and in setting up primitive counter-cultures.

A second resolution is to view Christianity as having broad areas of contact with more or less innocuous areas of culture. Christians are expected to take part in the life of society in general. They should excel at whatever their occupations may be. Implicit in this position is the belief that God will let those prosper who believe in Him. In this way the admiration of unbelievers will be kindled and a point of contact will be given for evangelization. Artistic things would be enjoyed by Christians choosing this option, although they would be inclined to be sceptical towards anything which wasn't produced by confessing Christians. The important point is that culture is seen as an operational basis - not in itself evil but definitely intrinsically worthless - bringing the Christian closer to the non-Christian and giving him an opportunity to evangelize.

A third way of looking at the relationship between Christianity and culture, projects the idea that culture itself is something that must be converted. Not only people are the object of Christian actions, but also things, activities and "structures". Christ is seen not only as the Saviour of souls for everlasting bliss, but as the Saviour of the whole of creation. Christians are therefore not antagonistic towards culture as such, but only towards culture when it doesn't reflect the Lordship of Christ. Seen from this point of view an evangelist doesn't do something intrinsically more valuable than say an artisan or engineer. Christians witness to Christ as the One who displayed God's care for His whole creation and who, in His second coming, will inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth. Because Christ is already awarded the position of highest authority next to the Father it should be made manifest here and now that His Lordship extends to every aspect of creation, and thus also to human life and cultural activities. Wherever a Christian sees his occupation in this light it becomes a vocation and Christ is witnessed to through this vocation. This view makes it possible for the art critic to be busy with the art work itself, without first having to justify it with reference to possible uses in an evangelization campaign.

A fourth resolution suggests that a certain aspect of culture can reveal truth. Christianity should absorb this truth. There is

essentially a one-way traffic between these chosen areas of culture and Christianity. Culture feeds Christianity. Examples of this attitude are the way in which Harvey Cox saw urban society in *The secular city* as revealing positive truths about humanity which should be accepted by Christianity. In Cox's *Feast of fools*, written a few years later, it was counter-culture which was the broadcaster of truth and of which the insights and values had to be accepted by Christians.

The essays in the Ryken anthology all subscribe to the third solution, a solution with which I am in absolute agreement. It is, of course, in general terms the reformed position and more specifically the Calvinistic view. Within this broad third option there naturally is room for a number of variations. The collection gives ample evidence of this.

Although the third option is by far the most acceptable solution to anyone who wants to view culture seriously on the one hand and who doesn't want to sell out Christianity on the other hand, it doesn't mean that this point of view isn't fraught with problems. In this case the Christian faith tends to become a philosophy. Fixed rules and sets of principles are postulated and sometimes rationalistically deduced. The nagging problem is: Christianity is basically not the acceptance of a set of rules or principles or adherence to a specific philosophy, but trust in a person, Jesus Christ. Is it therefore at all possible to speak of a Christian work of art, or of Christian principles? If not, in what way should the relationship between the resurrected and elevated Lord and culture (more specifically art) be expressed? How are we to judge?

In this volume there is an uncritical acceptance of the belief that Christian principles and a Christian philosophy are possible. It is unfortunate that some of the basic philosophical questions inherent in the third option are not discussed.

Apart from this broad consensus there is another unifying principle expressed by Ryken in the preface: "Unlike similar collections that have appeared in recent years, this volume accepts the Bible as the ultimate authority for Christian doctrine" (p 13). The trouble with this statement is that it is not specific enough. At least one of the contributors, C S Lewis, was by own admission no fundamentalist, of his essay "Fernseed and elephants" (not included in this volume). If, however, the term fundamentalist has any meaning whatsoever, Francis Shaeffer, also represented in this volume, must be one. This is perhaps not evident in the included essay, but in his other works, *Genesis in time and space*

for instance, there is ample evidence of his standpoint. There is obviously going to be a vast difference in practice between somebody using Scripture in a fundamentalist way and somebody not doing so, although both may have the intention of forming their critical opinions in the light of the Bible.

Another theme running through the volume is that imagination is a means of gaining knowledge. This is expressed by Ryken in the introduction and repeated by various authors such as Ingles, Gaebelien, Howard and Shaeffer.

This is an extremely valuable insight. Art is a way of exploring reality. It does so not with the clinical and objective method of the sciences, but with the metaphorical (in the wide sense of the word) and oblique method of the imagination. This does not render the results of the imaginative method less valid, although they are not open to general and undisputable approval, because of the subjectivity of the method. Every work of art must be seen as if placed in quotation marks. In the case of painting these quotation marks are made visible by the frame. They signify that what is said, made or performed is fiction, even if it refers to actual happenings. It is the "truth" conveyed by this fiction which must first be discovered before any sensible remarks about a work of art can be made. Too often people become angry at a work of art, for instance a novel, because it appears to propagate an unchristian code of behaviour. They would like the beautiful to be added for the sake of balance. (Tischler's *The Christian reader* doesn't escape this fallacy altogether). What would these same people think one wonders, if a sociologist, researching crime in one of the large metropolitan areas, adjusts his figures to give more soothing results? If art is, then, in fact a way of looking for the "truth" it has important consequences for the way in which we appreciate it:

A further valid point made in the anthology is that the imagination is not only a way of searching for the "truth", but that it is an extremely important avenue through which to discover the truth. This should open our eyes for the imaginative way in which the Bible transmits its truth. Too long has there been in reformed circles a disdain for the narrative aspects of Scripture, reflecting itself in dour and unimaginative argumentative preaching. Leland Ryken's article, "The Bible as literature" is a passionate plea for the recognition of the imaginative aspects of the Bible.

Another positive aspect of the collection is that it generally avoids the pitfall of moralism. Thus, it is a rather pleasant and novel experience to find Harry Boonstra giving a positive

answer to the question put in the title of his article: "Can satire be religious?"

The book has its negative aspects.

Firstly, there is the choice of articles. In a sense, criticism aimed at the selection is unfair, since personal taste must play a role; yet I wish to mention my preferences. In the first place I would have included Lewis's "Learning in wartime", in which I think the issue that activities must be claimed for the sake of Christ is better highlighted than in his "Christianity and culture", included in the volume. The former stresses the fact that every activity and area of life evacuated by the Christian will not remain neutral, but will be usurped by the devil.

I also find a lack of precise and analytical criticism. I may not have been Ryken's intention to include such essays, but the unfortunate result is that the collection makes a rather vague impression. It would appeal to first year university students in the liberal arts and interested layment from the sciences, but there is precious little for the serious philosopher and critic. The volume would have benefitted greatly by the inclusion of concrete examples of analysis. Personally I would have included excerpts from Eliot's *After Strange Gods*, his lectures on the work of D H Lawrence, which I still regard as the finest piece of criticism from a Christian perspective. His remarks about Lawrence's lack of humour and deprecation of education penetrates to the basic tenets of Lawrence's work, while avoiding simplistic moralising and superficial ideological criticism.

I would also have liked to see a closer scrutiny of the way Christian imagination was at work in the original Christian text, the Bible. Here an excerpt from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* would be most appropriate. He argues that the combination of the comic and tragic genres with their respective treatment of the ordinary man and the larger than life hero, is a specific Christian contribution to literature. It is completely alien to classical literature and only emerges more than a thousand years after the gospels in Western literature in the work of Dante.

My second point of criticism concerns the general high-brow attitude towards imagination which is prevalent in the volume. It is not only in the high and serious forms of art that the imagination and, hopefully, the Christian imagination is at work.

The popular art forms should not be denigrated as debased forms of imagination. True, there is a difference in value between Rembrandt and "Peanuts" but it is just as true that man shall not live by Rembrandt alone! We do in fact consume these popular art forms far more than the serious ones. The popular public is - need it be said - vast in comparison to the serious "cultured" public. The popular imagination fulfils a useful and necessary duty. It should not be scorned. It would be extremely shortsighted to suppose that everybody should first be converted to an appreciation of serious art before they could come into contact with the Christian imagination. After all, large parts of the Bible - of the synoptic gospels - were not written in high literary style, but in the mode of popular, "trivial" literature.

One misses perspectives on the type of work produced by Christian writers such as Giovanni Guareschi, the Chesterton Father Brown stories, Neil Boyd and in the area of the visual arts, Charles Schultz's "Peanuts". I repeat: because these works are of an escapist nature they are not necessarily worthless from the imaginary perspective. I think it is Humphrey Carpenter, in his book *The Inklings* (on the circle around C S Lewis) who refers to a remark by J R R Tolkien when he was accused of writing escapist literature. Tolkien's retort was that it is usually jailers who are most concerned about people escaping!

One aspect which was not treated by any of the authors, is the function of time in the evaluation of a work of art. Let me illustrate my point. I think a sound case can be made for the view that Wagnerian music fulfilled a demonic function in the 1930's. I can hardly imagine Christians attending Bayreuth festivals in those days with a good conscience. At that time Wagner's music was part of an anti-Christian religious cult, playing a definitive role in eroding Christian faith and values. By now the whole context has changed. A Christian can at present certainly judge Wagner more favourably. It is, of course, a recurrent theme in the history of criticism that what has once been judged as decadent, is later rehabilitated and becomes part of the cultural establishment. This fact is usually cited to illustrate the shortsightedness of contemporary criticism. But perhaps the issue is more subtle. Sometimes it may simply be that the historical situation of the work of art has changed (as in the case of Wagner) and with it the social effect of the work of art. The point is that one should not judge a work of art only in itself, but consciously take the historical factor into account.

I agree wholeheartedly with one of the basic propositions of *The Christian imagination*, viz that art should be analysed and criticised from a Christian perspective. Having done that, the question arises: what should be done with a work which is found wanting - perhaps seriously wanting? In the South African context this brings the question of censorship immediately to the surface. Should the un-Christian book be banned? Must a distinction be made between the serious work of art and the popular arts? These are problems with which the South African Christian critic must constantly grapple. There are facets of some works by South African writers which lend themselves to treatment from the Christian perspective. I think of the theme of sexuality in the work of the internationally known author, André Brink. What has prevented this writer from attempting such a study, is the fear that it may be produced as evidence for the undesirability of these works, and thus as an argument in favour of the banning of the books. It is interesting that the lack of censorship on the North American continent (from which the majority of the contributors come) is not discussed in the volume. Does this reflect a failure on the part of the editor to realise that imagination is something which is at work in a society and that it is not merely an esoteric flight of fantasy with no point of reference in the real world?

This underlines my main quarrel with this volume: it is not inclusive enough in its vision of the arts. The question is whether room could have been found in an already crowded compilation for those aspects which I find lacking. I believe this could have been done by eliminating a number of essays that do not really contribute to the development of the main theses of the book. There is in fact an unfortunate repetition in the volume, making the views expounded on literature and on the fine arts not much different from one another. That in itself is again a recapitulation of the perspectives set forth in parts one and two of *The Christian imagination*. I would have been more at peace with the volume in its present form if the title had been "Some aspects of the Christian imagination". The definite article leads one to expect more than is actually rendered.

Speaking of the title, I doubt whether it is a happy choice. When one keeps in mind what A Koestler said of the artistic and scientific way of discovering things in his *The act of creation*, it becomes evident that imagination is not peculiar to the domain of the arts only, but is just as much part of the scientific way of discovery. The difference between original scientific work and that of the artist is not that the one is imaginative and the other not, but that they have different objects



and different methods.

My last remark concerns the theology expressed in the volume. In the fundamental philosophical essays there is ample reference to the doctrines of creation and incarnation, but much less to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. This simply leaves the theological vision incomplete.

In recent years the German practical theologian, Rudolph Bohren has given much attention to the field of aesthetics in relation to theology. To those interested in the Christian (artistic) imagination it will be well worth the time spent to acquaint themselves with Bohren's *Predigtlehre*, and his even more important *Dass Gott schön werde, praktische Theologie als theologische Ästhetik*.

In these works he uses the distinction made between pneumatology and christology by the Dutch theologian A A van Ruler. From the point of view of the work of the Spirit, properly distinguished from that of the Son and the Father, and yet trinitarian in its execution, it becomes possible to understand that non-Christians can also produce works of art from which Christians can profit (and not in the rationalistic way proposed by Shaeffer in his article).

They also bring home the fact that imagination is not a work in a fixed created order, but in a world waiting for a new creation.

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