

Book Reviews

Thinking Christ: Christology and Contemporary Critics. By Jane Barter Moulaison. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2012. 183 pp. \$25.00 (paper).

and

Jesus Christ for Contemporary Life: His Person, Work, and Relationships. By Don Schweitzer. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books/Wipf and Stock, 2012. 307 pp. \$35.00 (paper).

Two recent books, both by Canadian theologians, not only advance contemporary Christologies by showing how a doctrine of Jesus Christ responds to current challenges and critiques, they also exemplify two different approaches to Christianity's traditional theologies in light of these challenges.

Thinking Christ by Jane Barter Moulaison of the University of Winnipeg is an elegantly written book that faces a number of urgent contemporary moral and political questions with a Nicene theology of Jesus Christ. Doing so, she advocates a so-called postcritical theology, one that neither simply adopts the thinking produced by Christian tradition throughout the centuries, nor condemningly looks on from the outside. Yet, she insists, "Postcritical is not uncritical; but the criticism arises from within the desires and principles of the communities themselves rather than from an extrinsic source" (p. 143). The voices from the tradition on whom she most relies are Irenaeus, Athanasius, Basil, and Augustine. Self-consciously thinking and writing with the spirit rather than the letter of these theologians, Barter Moulaison artfully takes up contemporary questions like power, gender, and economy through ancient resources, thus uniting Christians of today with their forebears. To the objection that many of these ancient voices were narrowly committed to particulars that render them unusable—that is, they were male and, as "Constantinian," inappropriately aligned with political power and empire—Barter Moulaison commends both greater care regarding the historical claims (noting, for example, that Athanasius's relationship to the empire was rather complicated) and greater receptivity toward everyone regardless of their worldview, parochial commitments, and privilege.

Two topics stand out for being developed in especially profitable ways. First is Barter Moulaison's treatment of violence by considering widespread

contemporary dissatisfaction with penal substitution theories of the atonement, sometimes dismissed as “divine child abuse.” She partly faults the standard, textbook approach to teaching theories of the atonement—adapted from the work of Gustav Aulén—for excluding the earliest and perhaps best description of atonement as recapitulation. Jesus Christ recapitulates the human story of Adam’s disobedience, restoring humanity through his own obedience as the second Adam that Paul describes in Romans 5. Sacrifice is not perfected but exceeded and therefore abandoned in the work of Christ. Nicene (and earlier) theology supplies a much more satisfying response to penal substitution than the other presently available alternatives.

Second, Barter Moulaison’s treatment of religious pluralism is wonderfully clear and rewarding. She identifies a striking commonality in ways that religious pluralists (such as John Hick) and liberal progressives (citing the performance work of Eve Ensler) simplify and essentialize the particulars of specific religious traditions, especially Islam. The common thread is a tendency to view religion as private and therefore subservient to regulation by the state. Barter Moulaison argues that secularism disguises its own theology about the nature of humanity and human dignity, against which she holds up the work of Athanasius—“To be human is to be Christ-like” is Barter Moulaison’s mellifluous phrase (p. 100). She at once affirms that Christian distinctives are not trivial just as they resist reduction to theory, while also showing that Christianity can approach interreligious dialogue because of (rather than in spite of) the particular claims it speaks about all of humanity.

Don Schweitzer, of St. Andrew’s College, Saskatoon, writes *Jesus Christ for Contemporary Life* in a style closer to a survey for classroom use, even though he also advances his own approach which depends heavily on liberation theologies. Throughout, Schweitzer’s Christology employs the language of context and portrays Jesus Christ as coming of age, especially in the last half-century. Christ is presently involved in “relationships” (a category of Schweitzer’s innovation in addition to the traditional focus on Jesus Christ’s person and work). These are the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the gospel finds expression as well as the questions about how Christianity ought to conceive of these new encounters.

This focus on cultural questions is the key to Schweitzer’s whole project, which—like the theological movements most dear to him—looks to ethics for driving doctrine. The ethical focus involves solidarity with the poor and other oppressed people, standing with members of other religions for peace and justice, or in other ways recognizing those themes, teachings, and examples that Christ shares with other religions. And “at times the church must explicitly reformulate its Christology in faithfulness to moral commitments arising from its faith in Jesus Christ” (p. 229). As a result, Schweitzer discusses traditional Christian doctrines about Christ’s person and work in subordination to the challenges that arise through Christianity’s cultural

embodiment. Whereas the Cappadocians described the incarnation ontologically—Christ takes on human nature—Christology comes of age somewhat differently in recognition of the profound role that culture plays for one's identity. Schweitzer's focus on ethical rather than doctrinal matters, in the first instance, arises from wanting to guard against the dogmatic excesses of any Christology (or theology, for that matter) once it takes on an ideological life of its own.

On this point, it is worth pondering how Schweitzer and Barter Moulaison diverge when it comes to projects that have so much in common. In my estimation, Schweitzer regrettably neglects full-bodied doctrinal considerations where the contemporary anxieties he identifies seem most to warrant them. While this is a project at which Barter Moulaison excels with great distinction, I admit to wondering about the Christian resources that Schweitzer would commend to those seeking a more genuine point of departure for interreligious dialogue, for instance.

For all the truth in claims about Jesus' "radical inclusivity," this also strikes me as the kind of avowal that can quickly outrun the person we are talking about and can even begin to take on the odor of ideology. Consider, for example, how Schweitzer treats Jesus Christ's normativity as the center of history as a threat to all other "claims to ultimate validity" (p. 201). Which other claims does Schweitzer have in mind? He confidently singles out empires but retreats from how Christ's normativity challenges other religions, especially given the potential for violence and cultural oppression. A beautiful meditation on the non-finality of knowledge owing to God's transcendence then follows, with the implication that all Christian knowing must remain open to revision. But it is precisely this step that threatens to edge out aspects of a richer and more thoroughgoing discourse on what might be called a theology of idolatry. Some parts of empires (perhaps most) and features and practices of other religions (such as Hinduism's caste system or Molech's demand for human sacrifice) will call for resistance rather than dialogue—judgment and condemnation rather than openness. And while Schweitzer identifies historical instances of this distinction, he nearly always relies on other, often problematic distinctions, such as the one between religion and empire, offering no consideration (as Barter Moulaison does) of how this separation is part of the ideology of liberalism in modernity.

These comments are possibly related to a curiosity with Schweitzer's book that I would otherwise hesitate to mention. I found the use of footnotes excessive and idiosyncratic. Often several sentences in a row are followed by citations, usually doing very little critical work other than offering mild support ("I'm not the only one saying these things"). Apart from being an awkward device, this might also suggest to readers a certain haphazardness in Schweitzer's approach to the sources on which he depends, mirroring his uneven use of more traditional sources. This relationship between

what is contemporary and what is historic strikes me as out of balance in Schweitzer's work, tilted too far toward the former at the risk of losing touch with the past. It is an ironic place to be, given the claims about context. A final example will suffice.

Schweitzer holds up the doctrine of the Trinity as a salutary contribution of Hellenistic culture to early Christian thinking. Yet Schweitzer's claim that Western Christologies must constantly be opened for review implies that the account of the relationship between culture and Christ so central to his project nevertheless remains undertheorized and possibly even contradictory at points: Western Christians are enjoined to learn to *separate* their fidelity to Jesus Christ from what has shaped them as members of their culture, while newer christological ideas emerging from the global South, for instance, are to be praised when they *unite* these two things.

I have risked overstating the differences between the approaches these two books take in order to highlight what I take to be a genuine and instructive contrast. There is much more to both of these highly competent works (Schweitzer's final chapter on prayer is moving) and where they end up is likely quite close to each other. Even so, there are multiple ways of holding the influences that have formed us, of admitting that our knowledge of those things is inadequate to their reality, and of bringing them under scrutiny without losing ourselves in the process.

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