

The Art of Performance: Towards A Theology of Holy Scripture

by Frances Young (1990) Darton, Longman and Todd, x+ 198pp, £9.95

What place has the Bible in our construction of pastoral theologies for the 21st Century? How should we (or can we?) appropriate the Bible for guidance in the practical activities of pastoral care? What is Scriptural inspiration and how might our appreciation of the text guide and challenge actions? These are some of the questions that Young suggests in this scholarly piece of work which attempts to use the criticism of the Bible story to 'affirm and clarify faith' (p.1). The analogy she uses to approach the complex question of scriptural inspiration is that of musical performance: the Bible is a score, its interpreters performers. So, it follows that there can be many valid performances of a score and many valid interpretations of scripture and that this variety confirms its authority because the greater the music, the more there is for highly diverse performers to find within it. The argument is developed through a survey of patristic, interpretations of scripture where Young affirms a variety of approaches or performances of the text.

There are chapters on the Canon, on the concept of the Rule of Faith, on 'Jewish Texts and Christian Meanings', on how the Bible is used by doctrine and spirituality. The climax of this performance is chapter eight 'Improvisation and Inspiration' where individual 'performances' of scripture are compared to cadenzas in concerts: where the individual performer has complete freedom, yet are best when they have an integral relationship with the work and are not merely virtuoso displays.

The book leaves this reviewer with many more questions and problems yet to be resolved; some of which are, perhaps, issues for pastoral theology. The first question concerns the issue of the content of Christian belief. The historical sensitivity which New Testament scholars have so long cultivated leads to the realization that Christian belief changes from one period to another not simply in emphasis, not by steady unfolding or more careful definition, but in shape and content, as one cultural environment gives place to another. Is there a comparison here with the nature and performance of music? To use the criteria of the 'original intention' of the composer of scripture is much more problematical than Young seems to allow for. What are the limits to what we might regard as legitimate interpretation? How fixed is the text? How do we live and dialogue with those whose interpretation suggests radically different pastoral action than ours? In Young's thesis we are told that "the medium is the message" so that, in some sense revelation lies in the words of scripture. So, is it as simple as telling the story again and again for our audience so at they glimpse revelation? For example, what are we to make of the patterns of belief that centred on the coming and of all things and were not simply adjusted but died away? The centuries long preoccupation of practical Christian belief with death, not only as the focus of piety but also as the matter in relation to which salvation and morals were inescapably considered, has become for many Christians, including those who write doctrine, a thing of the past, no longer capable of playing its determinative part. These shifts are as significant as any that can be imagined. Examine how this has happened: they have not been the result of conscious reflection in the

Christian community at either a popular or the official level; on neither question has any change of teaching been promulgated. Yet it is hard to think of any matters in relation to which such shift of belief is more profound in its effects on the whole Christian doctrinal identity.

The effect is to give to doctrine in any period a more constructive role and a greater responsibility, and at the same time a more experimental tone. It can have no expectation of finality, just as it cannot reckon merely to restate the inherited beliefs of the past.

Let me take the music analogy: the score may be the same but the performance of the arrangements are so different that the sounds produced are hardly comparable. Bach arranged and played by jazz band sounds so different that the original score becomes hardly recognisable. So will any performance do? Certain types of music always operate within certain conventions but the score of the text of scripture has been performed in so many different ways that almost leads us into pluralism of anything of interpretations, yet, like a music classic, disowns performances that go against its natural grain. There is however much about the text that is strange and inaccessible. How alien are the biblical images used in parables? What are we to make of the interpretations within the New Testament of events as they correspond to reality?

Perhaps this over complicates my central point: that Young's analogy holds true for the performance of the centre focus of the New Testament, that is, the story of redemption in Christ but is difficult to use when considering the pastoral and ethical dimensions of biblical interpretation. As Scripture continues to be used as the basis for many moral and ethical decisions and standpoints the Christian community still needs to decide how it lives with those players who simply refuse to see that there are other valid performances. What are the limits of the Performers freedom in ethics and where does the authority lie in deciding whose performance is true?

Pastoral theologians need to decide what place the Bible should have in the methodology and shape of its theories guiding action. The Bible cannot be ignored and we have a responsibility to show each other how to use the Bible pastorally and practically. How does it inform our theory and care? Might the pastoral theologians argue that the community ought to stop reading and using particular parts of the Bible because they may be damaging pastorally? Put sharply and radically: if it hurts, stop believing it!

I have in mind two particular areas of pastoral concern as I reflect on this. The first is the issue of a discussion about sexuality in the Christian community and the second is the issue of the relationship of sin to sickness. As a pastor, if I perform biblical text in relation to these two areas to pastoral concern the music produced has damaging affects on many. In particular the New Testament text draws a clear parallel between sickness and sin which poses considerable difficulties for any pastor engaged in the care of the sick.

None of this, however, should detract from an inspired analogy which is discussed with care and skill. It is a book of scholarship that attempts to be pastoral in its approach. The challenge to be both academic and pastoral in our use of the Bible in pastoral care is left to us to pick up and integrate into our thinking and practice.

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