

Ecstasy, Symbol, and Rhetoric

BY F. MATTHEW SCHOBERT, JR.

Lest we succumb to the notion that meditating on heaven and hell will lead only to a disembodied, otherworldly faith, we should gaze upon Hans Memling's painting, *The Last Judgement*, intone the hymnody of the American revivalists, peruse Dante's poetic and philosophical portrayals of hell, purgatory, and heaven in *Divine Comedy*, or embrace evangelical Christianity's emphatic spirituality of conversion and obedience to Christ.

The history of Christian art and spirituality is replete with the fruits of serious reflection upon the ineffable glories of heaven and the incomprehensible agonies of hell. Lest we unwittingly succumb to the notion that serious and prolonged meditation upon heaven and hell will lead only to a disembodied, otherworldly faith, vacated by the vivifying life of the Holy Spirit, we should gaze upon Hans Memling's triptych painting, *The Last Judgement*, intone the hymnody of the American revivalists, peruse Dante's poetic and philosophical portrayals of hell, purgatory, and heaven in *Divine Comedy*, or embrace evangelical Christianity's emphatic spirituality of conversion and obedience to Christ. Far from being abstract theological expressions grounded in a doctrinal belief system, yet disassociated from the pressing demands of the everyday ethical and moral life of the faithful, these examples of art and spirituality illustrate an intimate connection between eschatological reflection and personal formation. The content of Christian art and spirituality ranges far and wide, encompassing stories,

events, and characters from Scripture and church history. Theological insight, as expressed through spirituality and the arts, springs forth from a delightfully rich and varied tapestry of ecclesiastical contexts and traditions, each of which imprints its own distinctiveness upon the creative powers of its writers and philosophers, poets and musicians, and painters and sculptors. These skilled artisans, all gifted in exploring and expressing the richness of the Christian faith, are nurtured in their respective crafts by the compelling hope of a full life in communion with God and by the abhorrent fear of a desolate existence separated from the presence of God.

The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, From East to West (Fortress Press, 2001; 384 pp., \$35.00 hardback), edited by Gordon Mursell, presents a generous overview of the spiritual heritage of Christianity. The contributors to this volume situate the genesis of Christian spirituality in its original Jewish context at the time of Jesus' ministry. Tracing the unfolding of its intellectual and practical developments over the course of the following two millennia of church history, the authors traverse the spiritual landscapes of the early church, the medieval period, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the modern era, and the twentieth century.

Christian spirituality, as documented throughout this volume, incorporates multiple facets. A vital faith maintains discernable tensions between the corresponding attributes of contemplative prayer and social action, individual devotion and corporate worship, and participation in the sacraments and study of the Scriptures. Ideally, Christian spirituality labors to preserve balance between these spiritual practices, fostering a robust life of religious discipline. The early church exemplifies this goal. One of the hallmarks of its spirituality was the insistence that "Christianity, if not lived out as an ethical way of

life, became falsified, and lost its mystical quality" (43). For the early church, the Christian life pulsed with prayer to God and socially-active compassion to others, personal piety and communal fellowship, Holy Communion and biblical exhortation. This period testifies to the har-

monization of personal and corporate spiritual maturation with ethical living. It also established the theoretical and practical foundations for future developments in Christian spirituality. For example, this era bequeaths to its descendants the intellectual and theological traditions of the apologists; the lives of the martyrs; devotion to saints, icons, religious symbols,

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and relics; Christian mysticism, monasticism, and asceticism; and the development of Christian liturgy, poetry, and hymnody.

Spirituality, however, not only consists of prayer, piety, personal devotion, corporate worship, religious rituals, and acts of social justice. It also expresses itself artistically. Herman J. Selderhuis, writing on "The Protestant Tradition in Europe" in Mursell's volume, has in mind literature, music, and the arts when he affirms that "spirituality longs for expression; it cannot remain hidden" (p. 192). Bradley Holt expands briefly upon this sentiment in his chapter, "Spiritualities of the Twentieth Century." Yet, while the spiritual writings of theologians, saints, clergy, and laity fill the pages of this volume, it allots little attention to music and the visual arts. Two other books published by Fortress Press, however, fill this void.

Andrew Wilson-Dickson's *The Story of Christian Music* (Fortress Press, 1996; 256 pp., \$35.00 hardback), like Mursell's volume, makes use of a historical approach in presenting the development of Christian music from its birth in connection with Hebrew music and psalms through the succeeding periods of church history to the close of the twentieth century. Recognizing that music is often at the center of intense debate and bitter strife within and across many Christian communities, Wilson-Dickson introduces two thematic components in the first section of his text that repeatedly resurface in conjunction with following discussions of musical developments.

First, Wilson-Dickson identifies three dimensions which music possesses: the ecstatic, the symbolic, and the rhetorical. Ecstasy denotes music's ability to elicit physical responses, which are primarily rhythmic and include clapping, swaying, or dancing. Early Christian writers, who perceived in the composition of integrated, synchronous patterns of music a correlation to the divine order of creation, noted music's symbolic nature. In this way music served to facilitate not only the contemplation of God and creation, but also other deep mysteries of the faith. Rhetoric refers to that capacity by which music communicates emotion, evokes feeling, and induces persuasion. This threefold framework pervades Wilson-Dickson's commentaries on the diverse musical traditions. For example, he notes that African-American spirituals overflow with ecstatic emphases, that the Eastern Churches extol music's symbolic power, and that the Protestant Reformers capitalized on music's rhetorical capacities to further their movements. Second, he speaks to the tension between the emergence of Christian music as art and the continuance of Christian music as worship. Does ornate music of exceptionally high composition become essentially a concert for the musically elite? Does music that identifies with the majority of congregants need to sacrifice quality? Without becoming embroiled in this debate, Wilson-Dickson suggests that the art of music should be as diverse as its cultural settings, so long as its intention is to sound forth truth.

While Mursell and Wilson-Dickson narrate the stories of Christian spirituality and music in a more didactic manner, Helen de Borchgrave,

in *A Journey into Christian Art* (Fortress Press, 2000; 223 pp., \$35.00 hard-back), adopts a markedly different writing style. She writes, not as to one who is reading a book or listening to a lecture, but, as the title indicates, to one undertaking a journey. The composition of de Borchgrave's book impresses upon the reader the sense of strolling through an art museum guided by a skilled docent who describes, points out, comments upon, and critiques selected gallery pieces from the expansive lineage of Christian art. De Borchgrave accents the feel of a walking tour with poignant statements and questions directed to the reader, as though one were in her very presence. In her explications, she clearly communicates Christian art's purposefulness. It is "not art for art's sake, but art for inspiration and instruction—symbolism to underline Christian doctrine" (p. 10). The intent of visual art, which music shares, is to "stir the imagination, encourage contemplation, and stimulate wonder and praise" (p. 8). Although de Borchgrave does not appeal to an interpretative model, such as the one used by Wilson-Dickson in assessing music, we can perceive the dimensions of ecstasy, symbol, and rhetoric in many instances of the illustrated artwork that fills the pages of this book. One piece in particular, *The Crucifixion*, from Matthias Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, confronts us with all three dimensions simultaneously. Beholding the torturous portrayal of the crucified body causes one to grimace physically, its ecstatic quality; compels one to contemplate the mystery of the Son of God's abandonment to death, its symbolic quality; and overwhelms one with emotions of compassion for the suffering Christ, its rhetorical quality.

These texts share a common weakness, which is also their common strength. To accomplish a historical pilgrimage through more than two millennia of Christian art and spirituality, they must sacrifice depth of material in the service of breadth. This creates the sensation of encountering a series of highlights in Christian spirituality, music, or art that foregoes opportunities for prolonged excursions into any of these subjects or their creators. The volumes, nevertheless, form a well-rounded collection of material, thrusting us into the vast, layered world of Christian spirituality—a world where ecstasy, symbol, and rhetoric come together to produce potent expressions of religious faith and theological truth that form, inform, and animate our ethical and moral lives.



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