

#### BOOK REVIEW

Nathan Crawford. *Theology as Improvisation: A Study in the Musical Nature of Theological Thinking*. Leiden: Brill, 2013. 235 pp. Hbk. ISBN 9789004245969.

Nathan Crawford is a minister in the United Methodist Church. This book is a revision of his dissertation. It joins a small but growing body of work connecting musical improvisation (especially jazz) with theology. While other works use this connection to explore different facets of theology or to suggest different approaches to hermeneutics, Crawford is concerned with the more practical aspects of theology. Situating himself in a pluralistic world in which no one worldview “can be considered authoritative for all people” because no one “can take into account all information” (2), his concern is to combat “thinking God” in any totalizing or limiting way in favor of a way that is open. This leads him to propose the thesis “that theology is improvisation” (4). Musical improvisation is about drawing on resources in the moment without concern for attaining to a definitive version of the song being improvised upon; Crawford argues that theology should adopt a similar approach to its undertakings. To this end, he employs the insights of two philosophers, American traditions of musical improvisation, and two theologians to first clear the board and then to set the stage for his project of using “attunement” in theological thinking.

Crawford finds the root of restricted understandings of God in the Reformation, in contrast to the open conceptions of previous thinkers such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas. He argues that Luther, Schleiermacher, and Barth alike develop theologies that close off alternative ways of thinking about God. Luther’s narrow doctrine of God downplays tradition; Schleiermacher’s “feeling of dependence” trumps Scripture and experience; and

Barth disallows knowledge of God that is not filtered through the church. Crawford then turns his attention to the works of a number of contemporary theologians, including Kevin Vanhoozer. Like Crawford, Vanhoozer uses improvisation in constructing his theology, but Crawford insists that Vanhoozer does not follow through with its implications: “his work limits the forms available for thinking God to what is in Scripture” (23). Much later in the book, Crawford concedes that Scripture occupies a privileged place in Christian theology on the grounds that it is “the main place where we see God’s interaction with humanity” (200) but offers no suggestions for what the relationship between Scripture and other sources for theology ought to be.

The first part of the body of Crawford’s work entails employing continental philosophy to tear down onto-theology (a conception of God rooted in philosophical concerns—equated by Heidegger with metaphysics) and to shape a frustratingly vague notion of “attunement.” He begins with Heidegger to get away from “onto-theological, metaphysical discourse” (62). Constructively, he uses Heidegger’s musical metaphors for attunement to suggest that it entails connecting with the other in a similar way to one instrument tuning itself to another. But he finds Heidegger’s turn to a poetic as opposed to musical metaphor for attunement unsatisfactory because it “tends to cover what is unsayable in the Saying by bringing to the fore what language actually says” (61). To rectify this problem, he turns to Derrida. Derrida suggests that attunement is about hospitality; one must be open and accepting of how the other disrupts one’s life without attempting to thematize them. Crawford then highlights an essay in which Derrida uses musical metaphors to describe how Roland Barthes’s texts can be read in terms of plural voices in which no one voice dominates another. Crawford finds this approach more compelling because music does not signify in the same way as language and is therefore better suited to express the unsayable.

The third chapter of the book is its most compelling; Crawford takes advantage of the burgeoning field of literature on improvisation in Western music to fill out some of the musical metaphors that were not well defined in his chapters on Heidegger and Derrida. His own notion of attunement comes at last to

the fore. A jazz musician must be rooted in tradition and engaged with fellow musicians and the audience to improvise successfully; in the same way, Crawford argues, as a theologian, one must be “attuned to the tradition that one works within and to the conversations occurring in the theological guild and the broader world. The result is a theology that values openness over closure, formlessness over hegemony, and multiplicity over totalization” (121). What Crawford misses in his otherwise fascinating discussion is the conflicts between the multiple traditions in jazz and the efforts of certain musicians to cross between them. By their very nature traditions exert a hegemonic influence on their adherents; the question of how to deal with this constructively is left hanging.

The fourth chapter focuses on David Tracy as an exemplar of Crawford’s notion of attunement. According to Crawford, Tracy expresses this notion in his discourse on dialogue. Dialogue should move beyond hubris and timidity alike, and should, furthermore, be open in nature without requiring one to prevail over another. With respect to dealing with pluralism, Tracy wants to gather fragments of religious expression together and to give them coherence without creating a whole that attempts to account for everything. Crawford creatively draws connections between these fragments and melodic fragments used by jazz musicians in their improvisations to suggest a way of bringing them together without creating a totalizing whole.

Augustine is an interesting choice for the fifth chapter of Crawford’s project. It may indeed be true that “Augustine employs multiple forms for thinking theologically” (159), but this alone hardly sets him apart from the theologians that Crawford critiques in his opening chapter. Other theologians have also used the forms that he lists in support of his argument. Crawford rightly celebrates Augustine’s hermeneutic of love and his approach to training the mind to think of higher things through music, but Augustine’s uncompromising positions on the Donatists and Pelagians alike hardly echo Crawford’s own determination to include “any idea that might help us think God more thoroughly and in new and interesting ways” (201).

Crawford’s conclusion brings up concepts that would have

been useful to know in the first chapter. He says, “I want to end the text by pointing to some themes and notes that I hit in the preceding argument but may not have been made explicit” (198) and proceeds to succinctly summarize his agenda. The reader is at last treated to a direct summary of Crawford’s own understanding of attunement and the disposition necessary for this attunement. Among other points, he also brings together his thoughts on “[t]hinking God as formless” (203) and gives a rough sketch of an ethics of resistance on the basis of his project. Unfortunately, Crawford’s own observation that his “argument has, at times, been insufficient, has not always made its point well, and is not as refined as it could be” (193–94) is accurate. Unlike a novel or a poem, an academic monograph ought to clearly and explicitly state the argument it makes. The above items, since they form “the backbone of [his] argument” (198), should have been clearly stated in his introduction and explicitly supported in the body of his work. Anyone tempted to read this book from beginning to end is well advised to steadfastly resist the urge.

*Theology as Improvisation* is an innovative work, but is also an unnecessarily difficult one. In terms of its content, it serves as a good reminder that theology is a tentative exercise that should be undertaken with love, humility, and an ear for a plurality of insights. However, the attempt to open up thinking about God to the degree Crawford espouses leaves one tossed about in a rough sea of confusion and doubt regarding God’s character. This book will appeal most to those with a background in continental philosophy and/or an interest in the intersection between improvisation and theology.

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