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BOOK REVIEW

Jeremy Begbie. *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018. ix + 212 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8028-7494-8. $18.00.

In a world where everything can seemingly be reduced to materialism, and where everything that cannot be explained scientifically is suspect, people will naturally be drawn to the arts. The arts offer an experience of transcendence to many, but Jeremy Begbie, Research Professor of Theology at Duke University, is concerned that some Christian thinkers are downplaying the biblical aspects of their faith in order to engage with the experiences of transcendence of those who do not share a Christian worldview. After considering the outlooks of these writers and the intellectual history of sublime transcendence, he shows how a biblical, Trinitarian perspective disturbs and reforms these platforms. He concludes by considering how a biblically-based view of transcendence can shape engagement with the arts. While Begbie is best known for his work at the intersection between music and theology, here he widens the field to include the visual arts, film, and even a passing reference to dance. Those already familiar with his work in music and theology will find old themes in a new setting as Begbie relates musical insights from his earlier work to the matter at hand.

His opening chapter surveys a selection of writers who illustrate the approaches to God and transcendence he wants to call into question. Readers may feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of figures and works he references, but those patient enough to look them up will find a curated guide to artists and reflections on art they may have otherwise not encountered. Begbie caps this survey by distilling four assumptions taken for granted in the literature, which he returns to in the following chapters. The first

is that divine transcendence is best understood at the point humans reach the limits of what they can depict in thoughts and words. The second is that the particular work of God in the history of Israel ought to make way for a general understanding of how God relates to the world. The third follows from the second: humans are innately fully capable of relating to, and responding appropriately to, a transcendent God. The fourth is that, as far as divine transcendence is concerned, it makes little difference whether we think of God as a "unitarian deity" or as a Trinity, so the former is adopted by default. Begbie takes pains to make it clear that he is not questioning the motivations behind the literature he engages, but he nonetheless wishes to challenge these assumptions and to demonstrate how a perspective grounded in biblical Trinitarianism offers a better understanding of divine transcendence.

The sublime takes center stage in the following chapter as Begbie briefly sketches the concept from Immanuel Kant to postmodern thinkers. He returns to the four assumptions he laid out in his opening chapter, shows how the concept of the sublime parallels these assumptions, and concludes with a well-reasoned critique. When dealing with such abstract ideas, Begbie structures his explanations with a judicious use of questions and embedded quotations, steering away from oversimplification and opacity alike. He even manages to come across as sympathetic to the position of those he is critiquing. For example, after showing the disjuncture between George Steiner's unitarian conception of God and Christian Trinitarianism, he acknowledges that some might see his critique as "distinctly ungenerous and unduly pedantic" (75). After voicing this concern, he reveals the hidden (and for Begbie problematic) assumption behind Christian champions of Steiner's work—namely, that perspectives like Steiner's can be "filled in" using "Christian accessories, without any major disturbance" (76). This becomes the transition to his third chapter, where the constructive side of Begbie's book begins.

Biblical and Trinitarian theology set the stage for engaging with transcendence in chapter 3. Begbie begins by acknowledging the criticisms of *creatio ex nihilo* and proceeds to respond to them on the basis of the "life-giving" aspects of the Trinity

that are first intrinsic to it and then projected forth into creation. The Father generates and gives, Jesus Christ unites the human and the divine, and the Holy Spirit empowers, bringing the future into the present. Begbie's discussion engages with current biblical scholars and theologians while remaining committed to Christian orthodoxy. He takes time to address potential pitfalls and to qualify his position to avoid potential misunderstandings.

After laying the groundwork for his discussion, Begbie demonstrates how, from this perspective, transcendence is no longer focused on how God exceeds our understanding "as an abstract 'infinity,'" but on God's "uncontainability" (102). Here there is no longer a good reason to be pessimistic about using human language to talk about God because God uses it to reveal himself; language is not wholly inadequate but simply unable to exhaust the subject. After calling the four assumptions of his first chapter into question in the second, he offers alternatives in the third. Against the idea that God's transcendence begins at human limits, Begbie argues that God is found at the very center of human life via the incarnation. The incarnation also stands against the move to generalize God in relation to the world, and Begbie rhetorically asks why we would ever want to do without it. Against the notion that human beings can respond to a transcendent God appropriately, he sets God's prerogative. Finally, the premise that God's "uncontainability" is bound up in the Trinity knocks down the notion that a Trinitarian view of God can be tacked on to the idea of divine transcendence as an afterthought.

Having called into question currently prevalent views of transcendence, Begbie turns his attention to what implications a biblical-Trinitarian starting point might have for engagement with the arts. The guiding question becomes, "How might the arts be caught up in the self-witness of God to God's own transcendence?" (129). One way is by rejecting the long tradition in Western art of trying to abandon the finite and material in favor of taking a cue from God's presence in and involvement with the world. Listening to the present groaning of creation and anticipating the new creation can inspire art that is somehow more than it is, reflecting God's "uncontainability." Begbie goes on to show that the parallel between God's transcendence and the

transcendence of an artist becomes problematic if the former is construed as "a freedom *from* the other" (148). However, when God's transcendence is construed as "a freedom *for* the other" willingly bound by covenantal love, then the art of his creatures is free to respond to the gift of God's creation by extending it in ways that are also bound by this love instead of trying to escape it. The way sympathetic resonance works in music illustrates how God does not have to be in a zero-sum game with his creation; rather, God's activity frees creation to be what it ought to be, just as two notes can occupy the same aural space without diminishing one another. Readers fond of Begbie's musical analogies will find other such gems in this chapter, but here they play a supporting role rather than being the main theme.

The conclusion divulges an encounter between Begbie and an art student of no particular religious persuasion who was intrigued enough to sit in on Begbie's lectures. It serves as a reminder that, for all the abstract thinking required, contemplating divine transcendence is something that resonates with the world outside Christian theology. It also helps to illustrate his argument that Christians have more to offer in their conversation with others when they bring the whole of their own faith to bear on the arts.

Researchers will be pleased with the ample footnotes Begbie provides to his discussion, as well as the index of names and index of subjects. The latter proved accurate wherever I checked them.

Those with some theological or philosophical training and who also happen to be intrigued by the arts will find this book worthwhile. Artists without an academic background may struggle, but with perseverance and a little research, they too may find it beneficial. I wholeheartedly recommend it to artists, those who appreciate art, and those who are looking for a meaningful connection between Christianity and their experiences of transcendence.

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