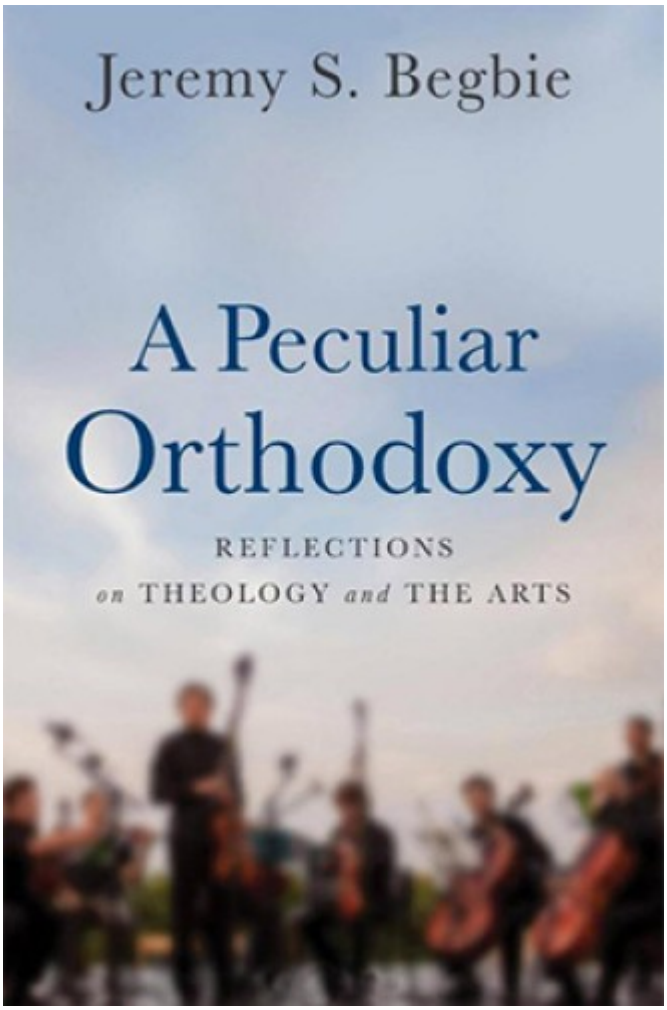
Thinking musically about God

One note fills the whole space. Then we add another—and a third.

by Mark A. Peters in the August 14, 2019 issue

In Review



A Peculiar Orthodoxy

Reflections on Theology and the Arts

By Jeremy S. Begbie
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While it would have been inconceivable for premodern Christians to regard the realms of theology and the arts as separate and distinct, forces of the Enlightenment and modernity did just that in Western thought. This separation was effected not only by those who rejected Christianity. Protestant Christians, building on a suspicion of the arts inherent in some Reformation traditions, were complicit in defining theology as housed in the church and the art world as housed in a separate (and secular) sphere.

Recent decades, however, show a reawakening of interest in robust dialogue between theology and the arts, from theological perspectives on the arts to exploring theological ideas through the arts. Jeremy Begbie, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, has been one of the leading voices in this dialogue for over 25 years.

In the introduction to this collection of nine essays (each of which was originally published between 2007 and 2013), Begbie expresses concern that some recent engagements with theology and the arts tend to downplay orthodox Christian beliefs and practices. In employing the phrase “peculiar orthodoxy” in his title, he seeks to highlight both the strangeness and distinctiveness of orthodoxy. He describes the “stubborn peculiarity of biblically based orthodoxy—centering on the embodiment of the world’s Creator in a crucified king, and a God who is perplexingly threefold.” The doctrines of the triunity of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and the incarnation of Jesus Christ are key currents of thought that run throughout the book.

Begbie’s clearly structured arguments draw on a vast body of literature in a wide range of disciplines. Readers will benefit from deep engagement with each of the chapters. I found two of them to be particularly enlightening.

“Room of One’s Own? Music, Space, and Freedom” highlights one of Begbie’s key contributions to theology and the arts by providing an example of what theology can learn from music. Many scholars have insightfully drawn upon theological sources to aid our understanding of the arts. Begbie is one of a much smaller number who have also asked how the arts help us better understand theology. In this chapter, he convincingly demonstrates how a consideration of space in musical terms can reveal new insights about divine and human freedom, the doctrine of the incarnation, and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Begbie argues that the way we typically conceive of space has limited our understanding of key Christian doctrines. “In modernity, an unwarranted reliance on conceptual frameworks that favor spatial visualization and its associated language has repeatedly frustrated and distorted Christian theology in its attempt to explicate the New Testament’s rendering of the character of freedom, divine and human.” He then turns to music. “If we move from the visible to the audible, however, a different world unfolds.” Music presents a richer conception of space. When we hear a single note, it fills our entire sound space. But we can also add a second note, and a third, without canceling out the first. Each note can be heard both as distinct and as existing in relation to the other notes.

Begbie concludes by considering how applying a musical conception of space can provide us with new and better ways to think theologically. With respect to Christ’s two natures, for example, he writes:

> We will be more capable of conceiving the person of Christ not as the Son entering a finite receptacle but as the co-presence of God’s space and the space of the creation: the Son sharing created space while yet remaining the Father’s eternal Son and thus primordially inhabiting God’s eternal trinitarian space.

A chapter called “The Holy Spirit at Work in the Arts: Learning from George Herbert” is also illuminating. Here Begbie provides a close reading of Herbert’s poem “Ephes. 4. 30” (from *The Temple*) to elucidate “what Herbert would have assumed about the relation of the arts to the Third Person of the Trinity.” Herbert’s understanding of the Holy Spirit, Begbie shows, was deeply biblical and rooted in trinitarian theology. Through a close reading of the poem, Begbie explicates Herbert’s conceptions of the identity of the Spirit, the relation of the Spirit to scripture, the poet and poetry as media of the Spirit, and the role of music in relation to the Spirit.

Begbie explores the many ways Herbert sees the Spirit at work through the arts, including the centrality of the Spirit in Herbert’s understanding of his own vocation as a poet. Herbert “refuses to regard the poet or poetry as inherently antagonistic to the motions of the Spirit: they can be redeemed and enabled to flourish in their integrity.” Begbie concludes the essay by connecting his analysis of Herbert to general questions about the relationship between theology and the arts. “This poetry stirs us to recognize that the arts have capacities far beyond illustrating

prearticulated truths and to ask whether theology—including a theology of the Spirit—in some sense *requires* the arts.”

The essays in this book, which are ordered chronologically rather than topically, may be read independently of each other. Readers may benefit from reading the final chapter first, since it provides a systematic overview of Begbie’s key beliefs relating to the theology and the arts.

While I would not recommend this book as a reader’s first foray into Begbie’s work, it is a significant complement to his other writings and a beneficial resource for a wide range of topics.