

BOOK REVIEW

Christianity and Literature: Philosophical Foundations and Critical Practice. By David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011. 336 pp. \$24.00. ISBN 978-0-8308-2817-3.

When Gerard Manley Hopkins's maxim that the "only just judge, the only just literary critic, is Christ" prefaces David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet's comprehensive study of the relationship between Christianity and Literature, the reader intuitively knows that something very special lies before him in the field of literary criticism—a Logocentric and Christological vision of words proceeding from the One Word Himself. And this is exactly the authors' formidable and remarkably adept accomplishment, to reclaim and redefine once again a Judeo-Christian ethos in the world of English literature which has been sorely lost and abandoned to the realm of inane commercialism and banal academic secularism. *Christianity and Literature* is part of the Christian Worldview Integration Series, and the editors, Beckwith and Moreland, posit their premise clearly and concisely: that ideas have consequences and that since "the centers of education are the centers for dealing with ideas, they become the main location for spiritual warfare" (15). Spiritual combat lies at the heart of both great literature and great ideas in this study, ideas that influence the "idea structures" (15) in a culture which has tragically witnessed not simply the marginalization of Christianity as a predominant mode of thought and way of life, but also the privatization of Christian teachings and practice (14). The end result is the "withdrawal of the corporate body of Christ from the public sphere of ideas" (14) which translates into a nagging crisis of truth and organic cohesion, the fragmentation of a unified approach to discerning moral, ethical, and theological absolutes in both Christian and non-Christian literature.

For editors and authors alike, this leads not merely to a crisis of faith but to the impossibility of knowing, and the guilty culprit is academia, which has blatantly betrayed its Judeo-Christian heritage, replacing the *university* with its "integrative task" (14) of maintaining community and commonality with "*multiversities*", centers that facilitate and promote the fragmentation of knowledge, scattering rather than reaping the good fruits of a more than two thousand year old sacred tradition. *Christianity and Literature* seriously postulates that it is the responsibility of the Christian scholar to reclaim that tradition, and seriously believes that the truly just literary critic cannot separate a Christianity of knowledge from a Christianity of faith (18). In other words, the Christian scholar must not only practice what he believes in life, but in art as

well. The false bifurcation between the inner and the outer, between what one does privately and espouses publicly, is the same scourge which afflicts the political arena, and the bitter consequences of that are only too well known.

Jeffery and Maillet adopt an ecumenical and comprehensive approach to the works of literature discussed, envisioning a sort of unified field theory of English and American letters in which the serious student can only fully appreciate "literature in English" once the "persistent presence of Christ in the literary imagination" (28) is acknowledged. By defining both a philosophical and theological aesthetics of poetry (36), one in relationship to both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, the authors attempt to and succeed in positing a paradigm for just critical discernment. Although Jeffery professes himself to be a "lifelong evangelical Protestant Christian with deep, equally abiding Catholic sympathies" and Maillet a "committed Catholic with deep evangelical sympathies" (27), the two adopt a harmonious approach to the variegations of each literary age, beginning with the faith filled authors of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, leading into the waning secularism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, and then inevitably to the angst and agnosticism of the Twentieth Century, always keeping in mind that for the true Christian critic "literary judgments" must never be "value-free" (28). The danger lies when the reader heedlessly acquiesces before those implied values in a given literary text, accepting rather than critiquing a "protean subjectivism" and "moral relativism" which deviate from a shared world of objective reality (44). Too often, the judiciousness of the Christian critic is compromised when adopting an assimilative approach to the authorial values rendered, digesting rather than discerning the authenticity of a proclaimed truth and eschewing ethics for the sake of aesthetics. At bottom, the authors remind us, "the only guarantor of communal truth is transcendent truth; the only guarantor of authority is the near presence of an ultimate and abiding authority" (323). Perhaps Pope John Paul II's apt injunction that "Christ fully reveals man to man himself" may serve as a timely reminder.

Christianity and Literature is no less than a call to arms, a call to all young and budding scholars to be the next generation of hope for a decadent and vastly fading field which has lost its way in the quagmire of departmental politics, cultural irrelevance, and social agendas. The continued Christian compartmentalization of faith (24) leads not only to the disassociation of great literature from the culture that gave birth to it, but also to a self-inflicted literary malpractice which can never truly discern an authentic objective good while suffering from the angst of a spiritual identity crisis. The end result is always cultural suicide. The Series Preface closes with a challenge: "This has got to stop. We offer this book to you with the prayer that it will help you rise to the occasion and

recapture lost territory in your field of study for the cause of Christ" (25). Rousing words, and being myself a veteran professor of literature, I couldn't resist penciling in *Amen* near the margin. And when the final words to the Book of Revelation immediately came to mind, didn't it also make sense to add: "*Come, Lord Jesus!*"

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