

William A. Dyrness. *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: the Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xv + 339 pp. + 43 illus. \$85.00. Review by GRAHAM PARRY, UNIVERSITY OF YORK.

William Dyrness writes as an American professor of theology enquiring into the causes of the bleakness of the Reformed churches he frequents. These interiors were intended as containers for congregations who came in order to hear the word of God. Is their plainness simply a denial of traditional religious aesthetics, or was their doctrinaire rejection of imagery and colour a way of intensifying the inward workings of the spiritual imagination that had no need of external supports? In his introductory remarks Dyrness confesses to a certain sense of deprivation in his settings of worship, and even suggests that Reformed Protestants generally have a diminished response to the visual arts and to the beauty of the world around them. Taking as a starting point the belief that most American Protestants have lost touch with the historical reasons for their plain church settings, he explores the arguments for and against imagery in churches from the beginnings of the Reformation in Germany to eighteenth-century New England.

The question that Dyrness raises is: Was there in any positive sense a Puritan aesthetic? We are accustomed to characterising Puritan responses to the material world as wary, suspicious, or hostile, yet their preachers did on occasion evoke the complex harmony of the creation as evidence of God's goodness towards mankind, and some of them were prepared to admit that natural beauty revealed something of divinity. In attempting to identify an aesthetic sense that is demonstrably Puritan, Dyrness gets drawn into an ambitious yet not always rewarding survey of the artistic activities of the Calvinist societies of England, New England and Holland. Post-Reformation Tudor England has been described as a time of 'visual anorexia', but Dyrness is anxious to modify this view, if only a little. He explores the use of woodblock prints with religious texts—the illustrations in the Bible, catechisms, and Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*—in order to infer what effects Calvinist strictures against images had upon a nation once rich in religious imagery. He interprets the shift towards vivid portraiture in Holbein and Hilliard as a sign that Protestant artists needed to turn towards a genre outside the condemned category of religious images. The enquiry moves on into poetry, emblems, and the arts of

gardening in England, then passes into the unexpected revival of religious painting in Holland, before crossing to America to consider New England portraiture and tombstone art. The interconnectedness of these subjects is not always apparent, but Dymess does suggest ways in which they were susceptible to spiritual infusion and how they illuminate the values of the Calvinist societies that produced them.

Pushing into the early eighteenth century with a study of the ethos of Jonathan Edwards and his associates, Dymess pursues his search for a distinctive aesthetic of Puritanism without discovering more than the familiar and recognised values of simplicity, inwardness, and order. As with the hunting of the Snark, the Puritan aesthetic proves an elusive quarry, and much intellectual energy is expended without any great enlargement of our understanding of the Puritan spirit as it worked amongst the arts.

Much more rewarding, in this reader's view, is the account in the first half of the book of the many differing attitudes worked out by the early advocates of reformation towards images, representations of the visual world, and the place of the arts in religion, for these opinions, delivered as matters of belief, have had a powerful afterlife in Protestant societies, and Dymess has traced their development very clearly.

Right from the start, the leading reformers differed in their attitudes towards images, the decoration of churches, and the acceptability of the arts in a reformed society. The most enlightening section of this survey is the discussion of the divergent views of Luther and Calvin. Luther made it clear that he believed it was the preaching of the Word, grasped by faith, that changes lives, and that the power that is in God's Word in the Scriptures is what brings grace; however, he was prepared to allow music in reformed services. When he considered the role of images in worship, he did not condemn them, but argued that they were helpful "for the sake of remembrance and better understanding." Indeed, Luther's friend and follower Lucas Cranach was commissioned by the congregation at Wittenberg to paint an altarpiece, installed in 1547, which offered visual images of the Reformed Church as "a place where the word is rightly preached and sacraments administered according to the Scriptures." The scene of the Last Supper shows Luther sitting with the disciples, receiving the communion cup; in the panel on baptism, Melancthon baptises an infant; and in the scene of absolution (the third sacrament approved by Luther), it is the pastor of the Wittenberg church who

presides. This introduction of the contemporary into biblical iconography represents only a small departure from the Catholic tradition it replaced.

In Geneva, on the other hand, Calvin was insisting that the scripturally-sustained doctrine of justification by faith was all-sufficient, that preaching was the necessary way of communicating the spirit of Christ to the congregation, and that to seek the divine through any material means was idolatrous. For Calvin, "Christ has taken his humanity with him to heaven, and the Spirit now works, primarily, through the preached word." Although he acknowledged that the glory of God is evident in the creation, man-made images could never add to that glory, and to seek to portray or evoke God's majesty by artificial forms was vain, impertinent, and to be condemned. The arts of painting, sculpture and music are "gifts of God," Calvin conceded, and have their legitimate secular uses, but must not be employed in the service of the Church. Instrumental music distracts from true worship ("it may minister to our pleasure, rather than our necessity") and was therefore banned from services. Calvin did, however, allow the singing of Psalms as an act of communal worship, this innovation being in practice prayer sung in unison, a way of turning the congregation's hearts wholly and unitedly to God. The elaborate architectural framework of worship was deemed to distract from total concentration on God's Word and promise, with the result that Calvin ordered the church buildings in Geneva to be locked outside service hours "so that no one may enter for superstitious reasons" and indulge in the luxury of private unsupervised prayer in a congenial architectural setting. Dymess presents Calvin as a figure who, in the *Institutes* and in his instructions to his Geneva congregation, worked out a vast amount of prescriptive regulation concerning the order of service, the content of prayer, the nature of the sacraments, the status of images, the role of the arts, the minutiae of behaviour and dress, and the commerce of the sexes, all of it underpinned with scriptural reference, but with numerous rulings that were tendentious, arbitrary, and sometimes contradictory (as with the case of instrumental music bad, sung Psalms good).

Hovering between the views of Luther and Calvin was Zwingli, who dominated the Church in Zurich in the 1520s. He banned music as a distraction from the preached word, but hesitated over the abolition of images, feeling that they helped Christians struggling to understand the covenant of grace; only when the preaching had convinced the congregation of the truth

of justification by faith alone should they be proscribed.

Out of this austere environment of sensory deprivation came the Elizabethan Church of England, so many of whose leaders had their experience of reformed religion shaped by Calvin's teachings in Geneva. The Word, spoken, read, and commented upon, was everything. The English Church excluded almost all kinds of visual stimulus; black-letter texts on whitewashed walls and a royal coat of arms were the best that most congregations could look at. It is true that polyphonic choral music survived in cathedrals (where bishops also survived), but the setting for worship was otherwise bleak. The rich tradition of mystery plays ceased (despite the fact that Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, composed religious dramas). English theologians of Calvinist descent reinforced the harsh creed evolved in Geneva, especially two Cambridge divines, William Ames and William Perkins, who would have a formative influence over the separatists who began to leave for America after 1620. Antipathy to images and devotional symbols was part of the baggage of the Puritans who were settling in Massachusetts. Their imaginative life was inwardly directed, and intensely recorded in print. Dymess comments admiringly on the vitality of the accounts of spiritualised living that appeared in seventeenth-century New England, where the "Paradise within" imagined by Milton seems to have been more fully realised than in the old country.

Distrust of visual richness persisted, and continues to this day in the churches of the nonconformist congregations. That these congregations have developed their own distinctive aesthetic is undeniable, but this aesthetic resists neat formulation. This book forces us to think empathetically about the difficulties that seriously reformed Protestants have always had with visual culture; whether their rejection of what is rich, elaborate, and heightening to the senses is adequately compensated by spiritual and intellectual satisfactions will always remain debatable.

Gerald Curzon. *Wotton and His Worlds: Spying, Science and Venetian Intrigues*. Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2004. 178 pp. \$33.00 Paper. Review by DENNIS FLYNN, BENTLEY COLLEGE.

The author of this biography of Sir Henry Wotton introduces himself as a neurochemist and amateur historian of the Tudor and Jacobean periods, whose interest in his subject stems from the fact that it was Wotton who first