

**Review**

**William A. Dyrness:**

***The origins of Protestant aesthetics in early modern  
Europe: Calvin's Reformation poetics***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 232p.

ISBN 978 1 108 49335 2

*Reviewed by Michael N. Jagessar*



**The Origins of Protestant  
Aesthetics in Early  
Modern Europe**

**Calvin's Reformation Poetics**

William A. Dyrness

The Protestant Reformation in Europe was both a turning point in European history as much as the history of Churches in the West and its consequent global reach. Literature, ranging from academic to popular, across all disciplines on the Reformation and the Reformers abound. Albeit the best intention of what may be perceived as objective scholarship, within discourses on the history, the core theological disputes and articulation, and evolving practices of the Protestant Churches are stereotypes and subjective representations. This volume by William A. Dyrness addresses one such stereotype, the Reformers' and the Protestant churches' response and contribution to aesthetics. Is it the case, as a popular stereotype goes, that the Reformers rejected art, material culture and aesthetics, replacing image with word? It may be the case that too much focus was given preaching and teaching, hence the popular view of associating Protestants with cognitive and confessional dispositions. But is it the case that it therefore follows that the Reformers and Protestantism considered the arts and the gift of imagination as outside the scope of grace?

*The origins of Protestant aesthetics in early modern Europe: Calvin's Reformation poetics* is an incisive and well-researched volume. It takes on this stereotype by making a case that the Reformation, the Reformers (Calvin and Luther and those around them) and the Protestant Churches developed their own aesthetic values, rather than rejecting art and aestheticism. The volume makes a good case for that aesthetics of everyday life, as reflected in art museums and galleries throughout the western world, is the result of a profound shift in aesthetic perception that occurred during the Renaissance and Reformation. The author's contention is that events following the Reformation prepared some of the basis for the multiple ways in which art and aesthetics developed. In retrospect it is reasonable to see the Reformation along with the contributions of the Reformers as critical engagement to the development of medieval practices and not that of an extreme severing with the inherited deposits of the past.

The second part of the title of the volume (*Calvin's Reformation poetics*) may not give a proper picture of the breadth of what is covered in the book. For the author makes a convincing case around the Reformers' conceptual and theological frameworks on the role of the arts, albeit at times in slant ways, and how these influenced the rise of realistic theatre, lyric poetry, landscape painting, and architecture in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The arguments of the book and direction of travel are introduced and located in the medieval context (chapter 1) and summed up and evaluated in an epilogue (chapter 8). The main discourse around the main thesis is then explored and developed in a further six chapters. In "Presence and likeness in Holbein, Luther and Cranach" (chapter 2), Dyrness reflects on the work of two significant artists, Hans Holbein (1497-1543) and Lucan Cranach (1472-1553), regarding them

as key signifiers on the way the Lutheran Reformation went. Both of their works both reflect influences from Luther's refreshing discourse on presence. It is Cranach's imagining though, that reflects Luther's influence and his "new spiritual hermeneutics" (34) as he invited viewers through his art to see, feel and respond to Luther's didactic exhortation. The emphasis shifts from an idolatrous fixation towards a response (affective) of the viewer to their role as an active participant in God's world. The image or depiction serves as a sign or heuristic tool towards enactment of the biblical story.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus mainly on Calvin, specifically on how language and time evolved in the Reformer's discourses and in different ways have influenced his aesthetic. A timely distinction between the medieval framework of the Mass as a centripetal focus with that of Calvin's teaching or re-reading of the liturgical drama as centrifugal (moving outwards), pushes Luther's understanding further towards a working-outwards outside the space of church. Believers were called to respond, to become "living images" (58) enacting the word in a larger "living space" (59) where the encounter with God's saving grace will be lived out in the world. Here, Dyrness notes the impact of this understanding on the consequent architecture of Protestant churches. Preaching then, given the view of a centrifugal movement, must be geared towards forming and shaping congregants to live out the way of Christ in the world – the *theatrum mundi* ('the world as theatre'). The spectacle or drama shifts from the liturgy in the sanctuary to the *polis* (which is Geneva in the case of Calvin), effectively moving the performance from priest to *laos* ('people'). Dyrness' contention is that the Reformers' logocentrism ought to be located in the implications of the larger vision their rhetoric hinted at, offering possibilities for refreshing aesthetics. Dyrness points especially to the potential that the vision offered playwriting and poetry in the area of language. Calvin's discernment into the dramatic potential of everyday life presented believers with a new aesthetic mirror. To become a living image, believers must take on as aesthetic music, performative preaching, drama, and writing, among others. Creation as the locus of God's creative and re-creative activity in Calvin's rhetoric (preaching and teaching) – was intended to arouse believers to take up their role/perform their part in the theatre of God's world.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine how the Protestant Reformation contributed to the development of aesthetics in England, Holland, and France. These chapters offer some fascinating insights. In England, for instance, the veneration of a commonwealth of God and monarchy is interpreted in the context of a displacement (regarding religious rituals), resulting in a vacuum that was filled with "the cult of Elizabeth" (134-135). Dyrness passes over this distortion of living image as mere slippage (from and of Calvin's rhetoric), although it clearly served as an underlying premise for much of the colonial invasion and rape of the so-

called new world. Postcolonial theologians would contend that this is one of the issues they have been highlighting long before Dyrness, especially on how the work of the Divine in restoring creation became equated with the view of England as God's chosen to bring light to benighted parts of the world.

Slippage aside, Calvin's emphasis on humanity's role as performing the work of renewal in the drama of God's world influenced drama, literature and music in England. On the continent (Holland and France in particular) the reconfiguration of the social world resulting from Calvin's insights continues this influence, opening up "shared and ordered public space" (168) and giving "streets and workplaces – a moral gravity" (170). There is little doubt that the Calvinist vision (framed in the Belgic Confession as one example) influenced an open gaze towards landscape and portrait representation with creation and the created seen as a theatre of God's goodness and splendour. And beyond landscape, elaborate texts of historical events started to be inscribed in decorated frames and old altarpieces. The word has journeyed and evolved to become an image (a perpetual sermon). Of interest here would also be the work of Huguenot architects who conveyed the message through their work outside the walls of the church: restoring a fallen creation to a perceived original sense of beauty and splendour. While not the aim of the author, it did occur to me that corresponding historical events in the period and the duration of the Reformation, especially the colonial expansion towards the new world, were fed by this idea of the *theatrum mundi* and the believers' role in enacting God's salvific drama. As many still carry the scars and legacies of such aesthetics the need for further work here should be a matter of urgency.

*The origins of Protestant aesthetics in early modern Europe* is, no doubt, a significant interdisciplinary addition, from a cultural and to a lesser extent theological perspective, to the many volumes on the Reformers and the Protestant Reformation. The vigour and scholarship with which the author interrogated a (mis)conception about the Calvinist and Protestant suspicion of icons and symbols, making a case for the slant and indirect ways that the Reformation influenced how Europe and the West continue to see, feel, and approach drama of the world, is commendable. I hope, though, that the same vigour and scholarship will also be directed at necessary work to help European Protestantism come to grips with how these very ideas were deployed to exploit and impoverish whole nations and peoples. What shall beauty, splendour, and aesthetic sensibilities profit us in our obsessive genuflecting to an economic model that impoverishes many, commodifies every living aspect of creation, and degrades the *theatrum mundi*? If accountability to the Divine, as the Reformers contend, must be translated into one's life in the world, what has gone wrong?

Perhaps, in good *semper reformanda* ('always to be reformed') tradition, this is still work in progress.

While the book is loaded with excellent references, at times the author's reiteration of the main argument can be distracting in its repetitiveness. It is, however, an invaluable resource for theologians, church historians, art historians, cultural critics, and liturgical scholars.

### **About the reviewer**

Michael N. Jagessar is Secretary for Europe at the Council for World Mission in London (U.K.). Previously, he was associated with the United Reformed Church as an ordained minister, as well as moderator of its General Assembly and head of its Global and Intercultural Ministries. He has worked in Guyana, Grenada, Curaçao, and the United Kingdom in theological education, teaching and writing in the areas of ecumenical theology, interfaith studies, contextual theologies, and postcolonial themes. He studied theology, ecumenism, and missiology at the University of Utrecht (Netherlands) where he was awarded his Ph.D. degree in 1997. His books include *Full life for all: The work and theology of Philip A. Potter* (Boekencentrum, 1997); *Black theology in Britain: A reader* (Routledge, 2007, coedited with Anthony G. Reddie); *Christian worship: Postcolonial perspectives* (Equinox, 2011, coauthored with Stephen Burns ); *At home with God and in the world: A Philip Potter reader* (World Council of Churches Publications, 2013, coedited with Andrea Fröchtling, Brian Brown, Rudolf Hinz, and Dietrich Werner); *Ethnicity: The inclusive church resource* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2015).

