Book Review


Chris Anderson is Professor of English at Oregon State University as well as a Catholic deacon—a passionate teacher, who loves his discipline and loves his faith, which encompasses that discipline. In this book he explores, poetically, analytically and personally, the way in which a Christian can be a Christian teacher of English, without infringing or abusing the privileged role of a teacher in a state institution. Anderson is profoundly indebted to Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutical philosophy and inspired by David Tracy’s rich Catholic theology in which Tracy places the Bible amongst the world’s great classics and, from there, seeks to develop a strategy for reading. In brief, Anderson holds that we are surrounded by mystery, from which symbolic and metaphoric meanings are generated (in texts in his case), and the act of reading and interpreting is an act of imaginative participation in the worlds opened up by these texts. If we read intelligently, we are challenged and called into question by the texts we read, while at the same time questioning and engaging with the texts. Since the texts Anderson reads are generated out of the Judeo-Christian matrix and the culture out of which they came (the Greek), the plot of the book should be evident.

The book is divided into three parts, all of which overlap and interconnect and complexify the plot further. The first part is devoted to exploring the issue of teaching literature (Genesis and the Gospel of Mark), allowing the literature to raise the religious questions and issues for its readers and teachers, whoever they may be. Anderson tells a good story and one senses his engaging teaching style. Some readers might be put off by the personal disclosures in the narrative and the elliptical style that advances a single point through a labyrinth of pathways and imaginatively connected stories, but if one drops the supposition that this is traditional academic genre, the book works its charm.

The second part examines the way in which the teacher begins to bring their Christian commitment to reading texts, just as the Marxist, feminist, postmodernist, historicist, and so on employ their assumptions (usually with a flourish and pride that this is part of what constitutes a proper reading strategy). Thus Christian witness in a secular university becomes quite acceptable, by the secular university’s own canons. Here Anderson explores the Odyssey as Eucharist.
and Augustine’s *Confessions* as a model for the academic life. In the first, Anderson in effect theologically allows that grace is always operating in nature and thus in ‘pagan’ literature we can be looking for what the ancients called anticipations (via allegory and typology) of the gospel: the theme of self-sacrifice, the dying to live again, all those signs that prefigure Christ. It would have been interesting to see Anderson explore a non-Christian classic, say the Bhagavad Gita from Hinduism, or a secular classic like Camus or Sartre, whereby the challenge and questioning to the Christian vision might be more stark and sharpened.

Anderson is a chastened missionary, who realizes the boundaries and limits of the state university, so the last part of the book turns to the life of the Church which surpasses and moves beyond the university, for, in Anderson’s words, ‘it’s one thing to say, I believe, another to say, this is true; it’s one thing to teach and another to preach’ (p. 152). Hence, Anderson crosses the street from his academic shelter to his Christian church. As he puts it, ‘the central paradox of the book’ is ‘that Christianity can contribute to the university only by staying apart from it’ (p. 140). Clearly, Anderson is speaking about a state university, but his hero is Newman, and his church has produced a wonderful document, *Ex corde ecclesiae*, about the University being located in the heart (ex corde) of the church—which leaves me wondering if the final section is entirely satisfactory. I’m uneasy with the binaries of belief/truth and teaching/preaching—even if Anderson acknowledges that the last two are not always inseparable. But if so, why even generate these binaries? Worship and praise are usually associated with formal liturgy which metaphorically is located in the church over the road, but when I read Gerald Manley Hopkins or listen to *The Dialogue of the Carmelites* I’m moved to praise and worship—in an English or Music department, or my house or church. There is also a tension between a kind of experiential-expressivism in Anderson’s reading strategy (to use George Lindbeck’s terms, very applicable to David Tracy), and the cultural-linguistic paradigm which surfaces in some of Anderson’s suggestions. But such tensions are inevitable in such a rich fare and make it all the more stimulating.

Gavin D’Costa

*University of Bristol, Department of Theology & Religious Studies, 3 Woodland Road, Bristol BS38 1TB, UK*

*Email: Gavin.DCosta@bristol.ac.uk*