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7-2013

Review of "Thinking Christ: Christology and Contemporary Critics"

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Recommended Citation

Hege, Brent A.R. "Review Of *Thinking Christ: Christology And Contemporary Critics*." *Interpretation* 67.3 (2013): 314-315. Available from: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/300

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Thinking Christ: Christology and Contemporary Critics

by Jane Barter Moulaison

Fortress, Minneapolis, 2012. 183 pp. \$25.00.

ISBN 978-0-8006-9873-7.

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Postmodernity has given birth to an astonishing array of critical voices and fresh questions in every conceivable arena of human life, and theology is certainly no exception. In an age in which the “grand narratives” of the past are subjected to critical scrutiny and increasing incredulity, one task of theology is to determine what role these diverse voices shall play in our vocation to reflect critically and faithfully on the faith of the church. In *Thinking Christ*, Jane Barter Moulaison engages these critical voices of postmodernity with the aid of the Nicene teachers, both to take seriously the insights of contemporary critics and to learn from the wisdom of the early church, whose concerns were in many ways quite similar to our own. By drawing into conversation both contemporary critics and Nicene teachers, Moulaison hopes to retrieve a deeply christological interpretation of human life that can give a decidedly christocentric shape to contemporary Christian life and theological reflection. As she notes in her introduction,

Contemporary understanding of the gospel has been shaped profoundly by critical discourses—for example, by pluralism, secularism, feminism, postcolonialism, and environmentalism. Might it be the case that these discourses can also be revolutionized or transfigured in such a way by the word becoming flesh that they are given not only a distinctive Christian shape or form, but also a greater depth and clarity? (p. 4)

To encourage fresh insights on the uniqueness and relevance of the Christian faith in a postmodern situation, Moulaison devotes one chapter to each of the statements of the second article of the Nicene Creed. She begins each chapter with a brief description of the issue at stake (e.g., environmentalism, religious pluralism, imperialism, violence, or memory) and a summary of a contemporary critical position before moving to an analysis of a Nicene-era theologian

whose work provides a different (and, for Moulaison, a more fruitful) perspective on the topic. In the conclusion to each chapter, these two perspectives are brought into conversation to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary critical position and its correction or improvement by taking a more Nicene approach.

While Moulaison is careful to reject the notion that she desires an uncritical repristination of Nicene thought, she does occasionally fail to acknowledge the immense chronological, epistemological, and metaphysical distance separating the 4th century and today. For example, one of the dominant themes of the book is the uniqueness of the incarnation as the *sine qua non* of the Christian faith. While it is certainly the case that the Christian faith in a very real sense stands or falls with the doctrine of the incarnation, her analysis of that doctrine sometimes suffers from a failure to account for the radically different worldview of the Nicene period, whose concepts of physics, biology, and anthropology cannot be so easily adopted in the 21st century. The result is a doctrine of the incarnation wedded to a 4th-century worldview that many contemporary persons (including many Christians) will find quite difficult to accept.

Despite these occasional failures to pay sufficient attention to the immense distance between the Nicene period and today, Moulaison's book is a welcome invitation to a renewed conversation between contemporary critical voices and the Nicene tradition. She argues persuasively that we ignore the voices of our ancestors to our peril, and that contemporary perspectives are not always better simply by virtue of being contemporary. Her work is energized by a deep and abiding love of Christ, the human family, and God's good creation. It will be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of pastors, students, and interested laypersons.