

## Book reviews

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Frances Young, *God's Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity, Current Issues in Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. xiv + 474. £19.99 (pbk).

Frances Young's *God's Presence* takes a bit of getting used to. Readers will inevitably wonder what they are to make of a book aiming to develop a systematic theology which ends with a 13-page blank verse meditation on Proverbs 7–8, begins and ends each chapter with similar (if slightly shorter) poems by the author as well as descriptions of sermons she has preached, and is regularly punctuated by reflections on experiences in her own life, not least with her mentally disabled son Arthur.

What very quickly becomes clear, however, is that this is the distilled research of a mature patristic scholar whose previous work has shaped many of the sensibilities of scholars currently working in the field and who, at the same time, remains a committed Methodist preacher reading the church fathers as first and essentially preachers. That this book is a distillation of a lifetime of scholarship is marked not only by the deftness with which patristic materials are chosen and presented, but also by the regular footnotes explaining where previous publications by the author have more fully developed lines of thought under discussion. The book expands her 2011 Bampton Lectures.

While the academic will note with interest the studding of the book with insightful and brief (usually one-paragraph) summaries of developments in all the theological subdisciplines over the last sixty years, these are probably too telegraphic and encyclopedic to make much sense to an undergraduate and are not thoroughly footnoted in a manner which would allow the graduate student to retrace the stages of debates in the field. This suggests that the book was designed as a compendium of materials gathered primarily for the benefit of preachers, organised by doctrinal loci and centring on treatments of patristic texts which illustrate important aspects of the doctrine under discussion.

Understood as a dogmatically ordered survey of some main patristic texts bearing on the central Christian doctrines, this is a very useful book indeed, covering *creatio ex nihilo*, creation and redemption, *imago dei* and incarnation, sin–redemption–atonement, inspiration and sanctification, the church and theology as a discipline. It sets out the contexts and debates which informed

the theological choices made by patristic writers, recounting their arguments without becoming entrapped in difficult technical terminology. Young's stated aim is to go beyond the modern arguments among patristic scholars about the history of doctrinal development, in order to develop a constructive contemporary systematic theology in dialogue with and in fidelity to patristic texts. Each chapter draws careful and illuminating analogies with contemporary inquiries, rendering the patristic materials attractive and accessible.

Chapter 2 is typical in discussing the doctrine of creation by way of extended engagement with Basil's Hexameron and Augustine's various writings on the biblical primeval history. By showing how Basil and Augustine engaged with the science of their day, but explicitly refusing to valorise it wholesale, Young makes some very important points about contemporary science and religion debates, and the relation of Christian faith and wonder at creation to discussions about evolutionary processes. These points are rightly presented as discoveries worked out in detail by Christians long ago which are in need not of reinvention but of recovery today. Her constructive proposal is to suggest that there are strong analogies between the ways the church fathers read the material world through a presumption of its overall beauty and harmony. This way of reading is insightfully (and favourably) compared with some of the approaches of contemporary biological theorists as they attempt to understand the role of chance or randomness in evolutionary processes.

The overall thrust of the book is simple, important and all too easily lost to academic theologians: 'What is really at stake in the Bible is God's on-going purposes, and our involvement in them' (p. 87). This emphasis on the basic orientating role of scripture in Christian theology through the ages is sustained throughout Young's treatment by her insistence that the patristic writers were always orientated by the 'homiletic imperative' – understanding their audience to be the worshipping congregation. This suggests to Young that a patristic-informed systematic theology is an expression of 'hermeneutical process' which nicely dovetails with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral which Young is keen to sharply (and probably unfairly) contrast with Protestant accounts of *sola scriptura*.

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The McCulloch Examinations of the Cambuslang Revival (1742), vols 1 and 2, ed. Keith E. Beebe, Scottish History Society 2011 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), pp. lxii+400 & x+346. \$99.00.