

Andrew Hass (ed.), *Sacred Modes of Being in a Postsecular World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. xii +255. ISBN 978-1-316-51791-8. doi:[10.1017/S174035532200002X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S174035532200002X)

I accepted the challenge of reviewing this book with a degree of caution – a wariness prompted by several factors. First, and perhaps the least, of my problems is that I am mentioned in the acknowledgements as one of those standing by to offer words of encouragement for the project of gathering contributors to respond to and build upon David Jasper's trilogy of works examining what the sacred might mean in a post-secular world (*The Sacred Desert*, 2004; *The Sacred Body*, 2009; *The Sacred Community*, 2012).

I should add as a further caveat to readers of this review that I regard several of the contributors as personal friends, though they would undoubtedly hasten to remark that this has never tempered my criticisms in our various engagements over the years in the intra-disciplinary arena of literature and theology.

Calling this academic field intra- rather than inter-disciplinary brings me to a further cause for hesitancy: many of the contributors have been pioneers in developing the discourse between literature, theology, and the arts more widely; three indeed (Andrew Hass, David Jasper and Graham Ward) have developed our understanding in the course of long service as editors of the journal *Literature and Theology*. Yet, all but one of the other contributors – the cultural theorist, Mieke Bal – has one foot firmly planted in an area generally designated these days as Theology and Religious Studies. It is one sign of these 'post-secular' times that academic departments flying under this flag have increasingly absorbed, or (depending upon one's perspective) made raids upon, other disciplines such as art history, literature, philosophy or politics in a way rarely reciprocated by the departments whose subject matter, rather than distinctive methodologies, they have annexed.

Books, pictures, words and ideologies are perforce the means through which theologians and students of religions investigate and write about the human apprehension of the sacred, as preachers have always known, and it will perhaps come as little surprise that at least half of the contributors are ordained ministers. For, make no mistake, this is at heart a theological enterprise and part of my initial reluctance to engage with it stemmed from having no formal theological training. However, David Jasper's response, by way of an 'Afterword' (pp. 223-33) partly relieves me of the need to offer a detailed commentary upon the ways in which the various pieces intersect with or diverge from his own thinking, or indeed from each other.

Rather, in what follows, I am offering an Anglican laywoman's evaluation of post-secular theology, and the issues it both considers and in turn raises, as gained from 'eavesdropping' on eminent theologians talking among themselves. The first challenge is trying to identify the nature of the conversation: literary scholars like to identify such things as 'intended audience' or 'genre expectations'. There is a certain amount of theological jargon in the volume, but all easily resolved by consulting Google or similar. The problem has more to do with attempting to identify the genre/genres in which post-secular theology operates. Jasper's own work in the trilogy under consideration exemplifies the challenge and is well described by the volume's editor when he remarks 'It is an exercise that is neither purely and strictly scholarship, nor

criticism nor reflection, nor meditation, nor homily' (p. 19). Getting a purchase on an exercise without fixed literary coordinates can be bewildering, but this volume forces the acknowledgement that indeterminacy is part of the condition of post-secularity, a condition where 'the old antagonism between "the religious" and "the secular" . . . has given way, under the precarity of both sides, to a certain mutual reliance', where the secular and the religious are inter-dependent (p. 2), or where, to express it in terms some Christian congregations might find it hard to accept, it is no longer feasible to follow the simplicity of the Pauline injunction 'Be ye separate' (2 Cor. 6.17).

And yet, for all the talk of a post-secular theology that breaks traditional boundaries and 'abjures the systematic' (p. 12) a sense emerges of a slightly rarified conversation taking place between a group of senior theologians whose 'multiple and disparate voices' (p. 11) seem curiously homogeneous. It might be objected that this is of the nature of academic discourse when senior figures consider an issue of mutual interest. But despite personal confessional allegiances to Catholicism, Anglicanism and other Reformed churches, and the presence of two non-European voices (the American, Thomas Altizer, and the Chinese, Yang Huilin) there is less evidence of 'diversity' than is becoming a *desideratum* (if scarcely as yet the norm) in cognate humanities disciplines. The one female contributor, Mieke Bal, speaks much of matters of perspective, but here her major focus upon representations of death, necessarily sidelines her interest in gender debates to a few throwaway comments in responding to David Jasper's analysis of Velázquez's painting, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. Given this book's frequent return to the concept of the liturgical, it would have been interesting to have had contributions from those who feel strongly about their exclusion from the Roman Catholic priesthood, or indeed from some non-Christian religious communities as they negotiate their way between a tradition of the sacred (deriving from the Latin *sacer*, 'set apart' or 'consecrated') as a male preserve and the drive to a more sexually egalitarian world.

That is not to say that the book is devoid of disagreement or critique. It is indeed a mark of the careful editorial curation that all the contributors have in their various ways taken seriously their response to David Jasper's trilogy, rather than, as is all too often the way in *festschriften*, offloading an as yet unplaced article. In a feisty analytical piece, for instance, Paul Fiddes addresses Jasper's understanding of the sacramental, questioning his adoption of Altizer's dialectic of absence/presence, and opting to return to a trinitarian theology envisaged in terms of a relationship which both images and invites participation. Taking this idea further, Fiddes suggests that Jasper's vision of the sacred community is too closely identified with the Christian church, thus setting it in opposition to the secular world, or indeed to other religions. Fiddes instead pleads for seeing the church as 'a particular – not exclusive – form of the body of Christ', thus enabling us to recognize the form of Christ 'wherever bread is broken and wine poured out, and wherever in the world people give themselves to others or sacrifice themselves for others' (pp. 57–58). Meanwhile Christopher Rowland, in his chapter, 'William Blake as *leitourgos*', recommends the 1975 Anglican 'Declaration of Assent' as a framework through which to appreciate the nature of the unorthodox Blake's artistic mission to reinterpret the Bible afresh for his generation.

Central both to Jasper's own work and to the thoughts of many of the contributors are questions as to the role of the church and of theology in the modern world

and how these can find expression in and through liturgy. The cynical might argue that theologians have good reason to find justification for their position in days when the church and the possibility of a transcendent being are often questioned, but the concerns expressed here have more to do with how to reimagine these roles for a post-secular world than with defensive positionings. The emphasis therefore falls upon the prophetic, whether in the *ex cathedra* vatic pronouncements of Altizer, or in Graham Ward's calmer expounding of theology as theo-poetics. Mattias Martinson's charmingly phrased notion of 'the theological dream of words that are absolutely adequate' (p. 63) is thoughtfully expanded in Ward's vision of theology's search, for 'the true word'. It is here, in the acknowledgement of that combination of imagination and hard graft that literature and theology meet, as

a craft reaching out to form that word . . . the craft of writing well; the craft of choosing well the word, the phrases; the craft of cutting out dead matter; the craft of letting those words come and be formed within us so that they speak beyond theological ideas and beyond the play of theological concepts in ways that truly illuminate, convict and replenish. (pp. 106-107)

In the attention these essays pay to 'the true word', whether in Yang Huilin's meditation upon the problems that mutual understanding can encounter in east/west intercultural translation, or in George Pattison's attack on the many ways in which language is variously laid waste by tired clichés or tactical misappropriations, we begin to sense something of the relation of words and The Word, and thus of the creative potential of liturgy in the post-secular world.

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Leonie James (ed.), *The Household Accounts of William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1635-1642* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2019), pp. xlvi + 325. ISBN 9781783273867.

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How many lamprey pies does an archbishop eat, and how often? How many melons and swans are required in an archiepiscopal kitchen? How were the Lambeth barge-men paid, and in what middle seventeenth-century London ecclesiastical household might one discover partialities to strawberries, herring, cheeses, claret, pheasants, oysters, cumin, olives, beans, brooms, geese, candied lemon peel (*citterne*), salmon, sugar loaves, 'great carpes', bergamot pears, trout, veal, and regular donations to the poor as well as gifts to the king? The questions may seem quotidian, but under the deft editorship of Leonie James, the answers play their parts in situating evidence from the household account-book of William Laud (1573-1645, Archbishop of Canterbury 1633-45) in wide networks of patronage, trade, gift-giving and gift-receipt, charity, friendship, and the support of craftsmanship.