

curious and fascinating argument from St Anselm on immortality based on God's love and our desire to know and love God. Secondly, several times JH quotes a passage from St Thomas' commentary on the 15th chapter of St Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians on the resurrection of the dead (c.15, lect.2: the Leonine editor casts some doubt on the authenticity of the section): 'The soul is part of the body. My soul is not I; and if only souls are saved, I am not saved, nor is any man'. The first sentence is untrue. The soul is not part of the body, and in no other passage that I have found does Aquinas say so. The second sentence is consonant with Aquinas but the style is atypical (cf. e.g. *Summa contra Gentiles* II.57.16 and IV.79.11; *Summa Theologiae* I.29.1 ad 5 and 1.74.4 ad 2). Authentic or not, it evokes the question as to whether the disembodied soul thinks, knows and loves God. If it does, *who* does so? If it does not ...?

Few will leave these, and other chapters and questions that there is no space to discuss, undisturbed. They may not be convinced of every conclusion but they will have been stimulated, and will not rest easily in sheer asserted disagreement.

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THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND THEOLOGY
 edited by Andrew Hass, David Jasper and Elisabeth Jay, *Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009* [first published 2007]), pp. 720, £27.50 pbk

This paperback version of *OHELT* is particularly welcome, making a fascinating and pioneering collection of essays accessible to students as well as libraries. The book, despite its title, is not so much a handbook as the representation of an enterprise, its (necessarily tentative) object being, as Elisabeth Jay states in her introduction, 'to provide a sense of what it might mean to indulge in the interdisciplinary study of English Literature and theology'. The Handbook is organised into seven sections: introductory, formation of the tradition, literary ways of reading the Bible, theological ways of reading literature, theology as literature, the 'great themes', and afterword. In the second section, Rhodri Lewis' chapter on the Enlightenment is a particularly thorough and clear introduction for the literary graduate student, whereas Lynne Long's account of Biblical translation and prayer books, perhaps aimed at undergraduates, offers only a perfunctory and partial description of pre-Reformation religious writing, which largely ignores the vast sermon-literature and is apparently unaware of primers such as the widely circulated *Layfolks' Massbook*. Section Three contains some enthralling material new to literary students not familiar with Hebrew, but Yvonne Sherwood writing about prophetic literature perhaps gets closest to describing the strange linguistic wrestlings involved in speaking of God.

The literature/theology nexus is a particularly slippery one to identify and define, and the contributors have interpreted their task in different ways. The essays are in any case valuable in their own right, but it is no derogation of the handbook to say that many, perhaps most, clarify what the interface 'might mean', in Jay's phrase, by falling strictly outside the interdisciplinary remit yet sketching out a serviceable boundary area. A particularly good example is Norman Vance's sympathetic study of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. Vance's careful examination of the relationship between George Eliot and Christianity serves to show how her concern with human suffering, while it often implies an unfavourable comparison of contemporary Christian practice with precept, is fundamentally moral rather than religious, let alone theological. Again, Stephen Medcalf's essay, which traces the religious experiences and developments that influenced particular poems and attitudes in Auden, David Jones and T.S.Eliot, seems at first sight to grasp the interdisciplinary nettle more securely. One might describe it as a spiritual

biography of poetic themes, and this factual basis gives it, as with Vance's essay, a visitor's passport into the literature/theology world.

Certain observations spring to mind. First, it is not literature and theology, strictly speaking, that is the subject of this handbook but literature and religion. *OHELT* deals with religious writing, devotional writing, and theological writing, which are not all the same thing: *Piers Plowman*, for instance, is as much about ecclesiology as theology. Secondly, there is a distinction to be made between the *about* of literature and the *how*. The purpose of *OHELT* is not to treat theology as a special category just because it happens to be the subject of a poem or a novel: if it were, one could as easily posit a study of literature and psychology or natural history. It could be argued that two separate studies are implied. One, placed at the rock-face of poetry, asks the question: how does faith affect expression?, down to the use of one word or trope rather than another, or of no tropes at all. Janet Soskice's important study of this area, *Metaphor and religious language* (1985), has not been superseded or equalled. Brian Cummings' chapter on the background of Protestant and Catholic reformations rightly emphasises the importance of Luther's 'profoundly verbal' approach to theology and the effect of this Lutheran emphasis may be seen in Helen Wilcox' essay on Donne and Herbert, which refers to the argument about a 'Protestant poetic' espoused by writers such as Barbara Lewalski. Much work is still to be done on this feature of immediately post-Reformation poetry.

The other necessary study is of writing that, as Coleridge put it, understands 'religion as the element in which [the reader] lives, and the region in which he moves' (p. 403). Medieval literature falls so obviously into this category that it is easy to ignore the literary implications of what Charles Taylor has described as the loss of a 'social imaginary'. After Donne, Herbert, and Milton, this sense of religion as an 'element' is hardly to be found in lay writers until the assertion by Coleridge of the poet's vatic role. Whether Wordsworth could be considered at all theological, despite his effusions of spirit, is very doubtful, and the essays on later writers are almost all about professional clerics. To what degree of elegance must a piece of theology aspire in order to be classed as literature? Ian Ker's essay on Newman points directly to the problem raised by this oddity of nomenclature: Newman was a minor poet and novelist, but one of the great writers of non-fictional prose (p. 624)

OHELT's publisher has ordained in its catalogue that the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes are 'literature' while those of John Fisher are 'religion', a classification which Fisher would not have minded, but, I suspect, Andrewes would. Such problems of definition, however, are not the fault of *OHELT*, which has helped mightily to clear the air and perhaps the way for subsequent investigations, such as Regina Schwartz' recent *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism*.

Finally, I would venture to suggest that *Piers Plowman* and many such 'element' works are not about theology, nor even about religion: they are about someone wondering how to live a life. Literature is arguably not a discipline at all, it is something to which people naturally have recourse – and so is religion. The truly theological, then, may be found in strange places, and of all the essays in this admirable collection it is, I think, Valentine Cunningham's hectic and erudite study of James Joyce that best demonstrates this. It reproduces the explosive energy of Joyce's angry relationship with his Catholic upbringing, quoting obscenity and blasphemy in a *tour de force* that does not make for comfortable or pious reading – almost, but not quite, more Babel than Pentecost. A wild assertion of word and flesh, it rubs our literary and theological noses in the torment and passion of incarnation.

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