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Book Review

Sigurd Bergmann (ed.), *Theology in Built Environments: Exploring Religion, Architecture, and Design* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2009), 314 pp., $49.95 (cloth), ISBN: 1-4128-1018-3.

Sigurd Bergmann, *In the Beginning Is the Icon: A Liberative Theology of Images, Visual Arts and Culture* (trans. Anja K. Angelsen; London: Equinox, 2009), xviii + 173 pp., $85.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-84553-172-0.

A recent volume edited by Sigurd Bergmann, *Theology in Built Environments*, primarily comes out of the papers which were first presented at 'Theology beyond Balthasar', a conference on aesthetics held in Denver, CO, in 2006. One of the volume's greatest strengths is its disciplinary diversity, which includes essays by theologians, Christian ethicists, sociologists of religion, architects, and visual artists. While diverse in their arguments and styles, the authors take up common themes, including an emphasis on Christian churches and on art and aesthetics.

In the introduction, Bergmann argues that because the material incarnation of Christ 'forms the heart of Christianity', Christian theologians must therefore understand physical environments—both built and natural—as legitimate places for theological concern. 'The built environment', Bergmann then argues, 'offers us a genuine "locus theologicus" [theological locus] to be taken as seriously as the "liber naturae" [book of nature] and the "liber bibliae" [the written scripture]' (p. 12). In other words, a deep concern of Bergmann (and many of the volume's contributors) is that scholars understand the construction of built environments, as well as interpretations of them, as a theological practice on par with the textual traditions that are dominant in Christianity; because of its intentional religious use, church architecture is a particularly prominent form of constructing such theologies.

As this description illustrates, *Theology in Built Environments* is overwhelmingly about Christian theology and Christian architecture—'Christianity, architecture, and design' would thus have been a more accurate subtitle for the book, rather than 'religion, architecture, and design'. The only partial exceptions to this are an essay by the artist Greta Refsum, which describes a series of artworks she created that integrate Daoist philosophy with Christian liturgy, and an essay by Juhani Pallasmaa on the ethics of architecture. Otherwise, all of the essays are either works of Christian theology or deal specifically with Christian churches.

Readers will quickly learn that the volume's title is slightly misleading—the essays are specific to *religious* architecture, but most often not to the 'built environment' more broadly. While Bergmann correctly notes, for instance, that 'the methods of interpretation' used by the volume's contributors 'could…also be applied to non-sacred architecture' (p. 13), the majority of essays themselves do not perform this non-sacred task.

Those essays that do venture beyond church walls might hold the most interest for religion and nature scholars, as they make broader claims about what it means to construct the world around us. After Bergmann's introductory essay, the volume begins with a meditation on the social role of architecture by Juhani Pallasmaa, a prominent Finnish architect. Pallasmaa argues that the 'ethical potential and task of architecture' is to 'dream of a better and more sensitive and sensuous world, and to facilitate the emergence of this world in the realm of the real' (p. 34). Pallasmaa's vision for the field of architecture is somewhat elitist—it is only 'true' architecture that brings us into such a 'realm of the real'—but his essay is nonetheless helpful, arguing that through the built environment we envision what we want our worlds to become.

Philip Sheldrake also offers a broad assessment of the meaning of architecture, writing on spirituality and the built forms of cities. For Sheldrake, building cities is a spiritual concern; 'the challenge', he writes, 'is how to relate city-making to a vision of the human spirit' (p. 151), as 'cities represent and create a climate of values that implicitly define how people understand themselves' (p. 155). Sheldrake does not fully tease out the ecological implications of this claim, but it nonetheless stands as a challenge to scholars who study religion and nature—in what ways do our cities reflect how we understand ourselves in relationship to the non-human world? In his conclusion, Sheldrake makes a tentative move toward this connection and argues that city-building needs a blend of both aesthetics and ethics, or what he describes as an understanding of beauty that, borrowing partially from Augustine, 're-conceive(s) harmony/order in terms of a just reordering of social relations (art/design are also systems of power), or of urban sustainability as a harmonious relationship between the well-being of humanity *and* of broader nature' (p. 167, emphasis in original).

The remaining twelve essays in *Theology in Built Environments* all deal with church architecture, although two chapters in particular bridge the divide between church building and the larger built environment. Wolfgang Grünberg and Anna Körs, for example, look at the social function of historic church buildings in contemporary Europe, and theologically and sociologically investigate how city churches function as symbols within German urban culture. Peter Nynäs also looks at the interplay of religious spaces and broader culture but does so by studying how people interact with a small chapel built within a shopping mall in suburban Helsinki, Finland, as they navigate and blur the boundaries between the sacred and the secular sphere in this unusual setting for a religious space.

Several of the volume's essays emerge from specific case studies of religious buildings: Theo Sundermeier and Sigurd Bergmann offer two short essays on the modern installation of stained-glass windows in Berlin's Grunewaldkirche, and Per Anders Aas reflects on the modernist design of the headquarters for a Lutheran relief agency in Norway, as means to reflect on minimalist design in religious architecture. In a particularly interesting essay, Annette Homann offers a theological discussion of the conversion of an historic basilica in Trier, Germany, into a concert hall and gymnasium, complete with a basketball court, for a Catholic high school. She asks, somewhat like Grünberg and Körs, how the space religiously functions in its dramatic shift from a place of worship to a place of athletics. In another case study, Oleg Bychov looks at medieval Gothic architecture and asks how scholastic theology and church architecture influenced each other; like Bergmann, he argues for the importance of understanding religious architects, designers, and artists as theologians.

Other essays take a much broader approach to studying religious architecture. From a theological perspective, Horst Schwebel's essay works 'to develop a theology of the building of churches' (p. 247), whereas Michael Crosbie's essay is much less concerned with developing a theology, and instead, gives a brief overview of contemporary religious architecture in the United States. Interestingly, Crosbie notes the growing movement of 'green' religious architecture, and describes one particular church in Nevada which has incorporated a number of green design features. Richard Vosko, a prominent liturgical design consultant, gives a longer overview of religious architecture in the United States that is both descriptive and theological, and addresses how changing religious attitudes affect new religious architecture and design.

The question of change and adaption brought about by Crosbie and Vosko's essays receives particular attention in the volume's final essay, by Sigurd Bergmann, in which he argues that church buildings are defined by movement—by shifting perceptions as people move through and around them—and by change. (This emphasis on movement is explored more fully in another volume by Bergmann, co-edited along with Thomas Hoff and Tore Sager [2008].) He concludes with a discussion of Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, in Barcelona, which was begun in the late nineteenth century and is still under construction and adaptation. For Bergmann, Sagrada Familia represents 'one of the best metaphors for a future ecumenical image of the church', as it is 'a church in the making, it is an organically growing community in movement' (p. 304). Or, as he states earlier in the essay, there is no single typology for Christian architecture, because there exists 'a plethora of different creative strategies for designing the spaces and places where those human beings, who are God's holy places themselves, can gather to pray' (p. 303).

This emphasis on change and diversity is more present in a separate volume written by Bergmann, originally published in Sweden in 2003, entitled *In the Beginning is the Icon*. In this work, Bergmann seeks to establish a new interdisciplinary field that takes the visual arts seriously as a vehicle through which to do solid theological work. This shift to the visual arts is signified by the book's title—in the beginning was the image, not just the word—which comes from a painting by the artist Asger Jorn and demonstrates Bergmann's unwillingness to concede theology to the world of words and letters.

The first chapter is a discussion of what images are, and fills out his argument that, perhaps, 'in the beginning' was both the word and the image. Images, Bergmann rightly claims, create meaning beyond their translation into words, and cannot be reduced to verbal/written description. The second chapter continues this discussion and more precisely asks 'what is art?' Here he makes the sensible claim that one normative definition for art makes no more sense than claiming a single, normative definition of who God is (and, indeed, Bergmann discusses apophatic theology—'negative' theology that strives to describe God through negation—in later chapters). He then argues instead that art, like theology, should be understood as always arising out of particular contexts. Thus in Bergmann's rubric the study of both theology and art is always contextual. In Chapter 3, he surveys different approaches to studying art from a religious or theological perspective, categorizing them into four different models (ontological, historical, correlative, and social anthropological) and arguing that a theology of art should strive to include multiple methods and not remain confined to one particular model; Chapter 4, which focuses on 'world art', further investigates anthropological models for studying art.

Bergmann's most creative work resides in the fifth and concluding chapter, where he develops a 'liberative' theology of art; it is also in this chapter that he deals most explicitly with environmental concerns and the Christian doctrine of creation, primarily by arguing that contextual theologies of art should be liberating for both humans and for all of creation. While this final chapter is not trying to further ecological theology in any significant way, it nonetheless demonstrates how environmental concerns can overlap with religion and art.

Despite Bergmann's significant contributions to scholarship on religion and the environment, both in his own theological work (e.g. 2005) as well as in a number of other edited and co-edited volumes (e.g. Bergmann and Gerten 2010), both of the books reviewed here only lightly touch on issues or concepts pertaining to the non-human world. As indicated above, there are a few moments where environmental concerns are discussed, such as in Michael Crosbie's essay in *Theology in Built Environments*, which highlighted the growing number of churches that are integrating 'green' design into their buildings, or in portions of the final chapter of *In the Beginning Is the Icon*.

Perhaps the biggest methodological challenge these two books offer to religion and nature scholarship is their demand to take material culture seriously as witnesses to religious beliefs and practices. These volumes are both centered on the argument that Christian theology does not just emerge out of written and spoken texts, but is also accomplished through architecture and art. While contemporary scholarship on religion and nature has been effective at analyzing religious texts and practices, Bergmann's volumes urge readers to focus attention on religious architecture and religious art as additional 'texts' and practices.

While these two volumes will be tangential to the work of many scholars in religion and the environment, for those interested in asking how ecological systems and non-human nature might pertain to other facets of material culture—such as religious architecture and art—these two books offer a valuable contribution and lead to provocative questions.

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