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David Jasper, *Heaven in Ordinary: Poetry and Religion in a Secular Age*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2018. ISBN: 978 0 7188 9541 9. £20. Pp. 151.

In this book, David Jasper wears his considerable literary knowledge and critical acumen lightly, and the resulting text is thoughtful, accessible and clear without being condescending in the pejorative sense of that word. An introductory chapter explores the rationale of the book and justifies its rather unexpected running order. Then there are chapters focusing in turn on Thomas Hardy, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Traherne, Sir Philip Sydney, Sir Geoffrey Hill, and what Jasper calls the pastoral tradition in English poetry. A conclusion and a reading list outlining where to find the less well-known works completes the book.

Jasper's rejection of a running order ruled by date or, as he explains, by the order in which he encountered the poets, encourages a more thematic approach. There are common threads of significance which weave through the book, creating a sense of cohesion and an argument which builds by accretion rather than in logical steps. One of these is Jasper's own response to the texts, and the personal nature of the book is one of its most appealing attributes. Jasper reveals what drew him to these poets, and at what stage in his life, fostering a sense of identification with him and with them. The generous quantity of quotation of lines and whole poems deepens this level of connection, especially when this is accompanied by a sensitive and close reading of relevant features in the text. Here we learn that Hardy's poetry spoke to Jasper as a young boy; S.J. Coleridge was an academic first love; Sydney's quaintness first appealed to him as a schoolboy; Traherne was a later, more theological discovery and influence. All of these personal details add to an understanding of the writer under discussion, while offering opportunities for connections to be made between them and a wide range of other poets, including Donne, Herbert, Newman and Hopkins. The rich interconnectness of poetry, belief and theology on such a personal level is compelling and impressive. It fosters an atmosphere in the book in which running critiques of aspects of modern life, such as the questionable dominance of the notion of "post-truth", the stripping out of mystery from liturgy, and the employment of a business model as a way to understand ministry, are set and justified in a new context.

A further thread of developing significance in the book is the power and nature of poetry to express the sacred, the bringing of heaven into the ordinary, which all of the poets under discussion affirm although in varying degrees. Hardy longs that it "might be so" that the nativity would cradle the miraculous. The world views of Traherne and Sydney are inherently religious, and they bring their own, deeply engaged and educated theological understanding into their poetry. For Traherne, this is an expression of theological "felicities"; for Sydney, his carefully crafted translations of the Psalms, completed with his sister the Countess of Pembroke, bring the concerns of the English Renaissance into conversation with the concerns of the Psalmist. Coleridge's high regard for the intellectual, imaginative and spiritual efficacy of words is shared by Hill, who brings ruthless honesty to bear on poetic readings of the world which find truth in art beyond the apparent truths of common sense.

In the final substantive chapter, this thread is woven through a reading of the work of poets who bring a pastoral perspective to the spiritual care of others. Jasper is fiercely critical of an understanding of ministry, particularly Anglican ministry, which is more concerned with

doing and achieving targets than being and expressing the hidden mystery of God in the everyday. His review of the work of Chaucer, of hymn writers such as Watts and Keble, of writers who might be labelled as devotional, such as Rossetti and Meynall, and of Hopkins, Thomas, Scott and even Larkin, suggests that poetry is and should remain at the heart of the church's life and ministry. Poetry's capacity to affirm the enduring seriousness of all that the church stands for and means, a truth which is often at odds with the obvious, for Jasper is to be treasured and encouraged. This chapter is the most fragmented of the book, in contrast to the cohesive sweep of earlier chapters, and its episodic move from one poet to another reads very differently from the rest. But its argument in support of an ongoing poetic impetus in the church is well made.

The tone of this book is warm and engaging and the reader is drawn towards an encounter with poets he or she may not have read without a sense of disadvantage. In chapter 7, Jasper notes that George Herbert argues a parson should 'condescend' to his flock in their and his human frailties, explaining that this is a reference to condescension in its original and positive sense. The minister is to come down from a position of knowledge and education to become truly one with his people, a move which is brave but worthwhile, particularly if it is accompanied with good humour. Such condescension brings deep spiritual blessing to both the minister and the congregation. There are some parallels to be drawn here between Herbert's understanding of ministry and Jasper's successful navigation of such a broad and deep range of writers and ideas in this book for readers who may not have considered such ideas or writers before. The result is a deeply convinced and convincing reading of poetry and religion in and for a secular age.

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