

**BOOK**

*Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life*

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**SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]**

What are the "poetics of everyday life"? What can they teach us about God? Art, music, dance, and writing can certainly be "poetic," but so can such diverse pastimes as fishing, skiing, or attending sports events. Any and all activities that satisfy our fundamental need for play, for celebration, and for ritual, says William Dyrness, are inherently poetic -- and in *Poetic Theology* he demonstrates that all such activities are places where God is active in the world.

All of humanity's creative efforts, Dyrness points out, testify to our intrinsic longing for joy and delight and our deep desire to connect with others, with the created order, and especially with the Creator. This desire is rooted in the presence and calling of God in and through the good creation.

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"Theology has always been handicapped, of course, when it tries to speak of God. Especially recently, it has had to borrow language from science, philosophy, and even from economics to try to shape some recognizable page of God. Needless to say, this has left many feeling like something was missing."

"But in defending poetic practice, [Philip] Sidney also points out that Scripture itself is filled with poetry that figures forth to teach and delight. David's Psalms are divine poems that 'give a face to God,' enabling readers to 'see' God coming in majesty, or riding on the waves of the sea . . . Besides the Psalms, the Bible engages readers' imaginations in the parables of Jesus and in the elaborate visions of the Apostles and Prophets. The great events of Scriptures are invariably clothed in color and light, from the growing light of creation through the cloud of fire in the wilderness, to the tongues of fire at Pentecost, suggesting that these intend not just to teach but to spark delight or fear."

***In reference to people's substitution of rituals for God***

"The drive that moves them to pursue the goods associated with their passions is a movement of the soul that, if nurtured more deeply and oriented rightly, would lead them to God."

"Indeed, all the practices of corporate worship – prayer, song, preaching, and so on – involve actions which necessarily have emotional and aesthetic dimensions to them."

"These trends reflect the increasing superficiality (and secularism) of our consumer culture. Since, they suppose, the pursuit of style and beauty must distract people from the deeper issues of life, it is something that ought to be opposed. But Robert Wuthnow's evidence implies that, even empirically, this judgment is untrue. Concern for style and aesthetics, his research shows, is correlated with increasing interest in, and even seriousness about, religious issues. If this is so, growing interest in the arts is something to be applauded rather than resisted."

"One charge: that the turn towards aesthetics is a move towards Pelagianism. But far from being self-salvific, "artists of the modern period pointedly do not seek something within themselves, but more often something beyond, hovering on the edges of their imaginations, drawing them out."

"The proximate ground [for the symbolic potential of cultural forms] is the Reformation celebration of creation, as Calvin put it, as a theatre for the glory of God."

"The order of creation is specially revelatory of God. Calvin expressed it this way: The universe is ruled by God, not only because He watches over the order of nature set by Himself, but because He exercises especial care over of His works. It is, indeed, true that the several kinds of things are moved by a secret impulse of nature, as if they obeyed God's eternal command, and what God has once determined flows on by itself."

"Culture is always what we humans make of creation. That is, there is always something of the goodness of creation in human creation, however distorted this may be."

"The significance of human culture lies in its being the arena in which God's work, especially as this is presented in Christ and through the Spirit, is recognized and embodied. God's participation in creation and creation's embrace by the Trinitarian presence of God – these together constitute theological grounds for the potential inherent in the symbolizing inclination of the poetic imagination."

"A pattern is emerging. Notice how desire and its object are isolated from the larger human experience; they are pursued as ends in themselves. Rather than seeing experiences of this kind as contributing to a healthy life, they are held to constitute such a life. But perhaps there is a deeper framework that lies behind these deviations. All of the people who are pursuing pleasure would likely argue that they are looking for a life that is well lived – what we frame as a beautiful or attractive life."

*From Augustine's Confessions (Chadwick's translation 183)*

"But when I love You, what do I love? It is not physical beauty nor temporal glory not the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes, not the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, nor gentle odor of flowers and ointments and perfumes, nor manna or honey, nor limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God, -- a light, voice odor, food, embrace of my inner man, where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God."

"Calvin was not opposed to the poetic – we have seen that he belonged in the tradition of late medieval humanism that valued this part of life. He believed art was a gift of God. But he also believed that art appealed primarily to emotions, and this constituted a weakness that made it incapable of teaching and edifying believers . . . Creation itself was, he believed, a theatre for the glory of God."

"Creative art can reflect God, Schleiermacher believed, because the highest work of art is humanity itself."

"The greatest work of art has for its material humanity itself, and the Deity directly fashions it. For this work the sense must soon awake in many, for at present, He is working with bold and effective art. And you will be the temple servant when the new forms are set up in the temple of time. Expound the Artist then with force and spirit."

"Schleiermacher argued "that creativity is fundamental to human knowing and willing, and that these in turn are evidence of God's presence."

"When the brokenness is understood in the light of the Christian story, even what is ugly or deformed can be infused with a depth and power — it can be what is 'appreciable.'"

"But if we do not yet see God, we do see God's work in creation, and especially in our neighbor. And while we are about our Father's business, it matters a great deal what exactly our hands are making and what we do with what we make, especially in our spaces of worship. We can be making things that we will store away in our brands (i.e., investment accounts) so that, as the retirement commercials remind us, we can sleep easily at night, or we can take what we make and pour it lavishly on Jesu' feet like the nameless woman in Matthew. Significantly, Jesus called this promiscuous, wasteful giving a "beautiful work.' But the Protestant habit of privileging the inner over the outer discourages such beautiful work. There is an irony here Calvin sought to purify the heart precisely by removing distracting images. But in doing so, he inadvertently discouraged the shaping of objects that stimulate the imagination and fire the heart, thus diminishing the scope of the very inner life he meant to celebrate."

### **Fyodor Dostoyevsky quote: "Beauty will save the world"**

"Relating beauty and human flourishing is not to suggest that poor people simply need to be introduced to aesthetics as part of their (social and economic) advancement. I am not proposing an aesthetic development program. Indeed, as the history of popular music (and popular arts, more generally) makes clear, creative innovations are as likely to travel from poor and marginalize communities to the broader culture than the revers. My claim is more basic: the aesthetic sense is fundamental to humanity. People seek to create beauty, to make something of their lives, not because they are educated or economically privileged, but because they are created to reflect God. Since symbolic practices are fundamental to human flourishing, and project of human betterment will seek to appreciate and celebrate the aesthetic impulse that is already present in the community."

"I have heard that the health of refugee camps can be evaluated by children's games. They note that in the worst situations, children no longer play but walk or lie listlessly about. In healthier places, children laugh and run about. Children's play becomes the canary in the coal mine — that is, the marker able to depict the presence or absence of justice . . . Here I would like to focus on the way that activities of this kind display the inner health of a community and suggest an important connection between aesthetics and justice. These obviously have implications for work among the poor, but the implications of their importance extend well beyond this.

"Theologians have rarely addressed these issues. But one who has consistently had his eye on such questions is Jurgen Moltmann. He has recently made a case for the importance of beauty in human community which he describes as all that resonates with and furthers the life of people\*"

"People must see that they belong to God Here we get to the heart of the matter in community development. For bread to really provide hope (and laughter and joy), it must finally become Eucharist — the basic meaning of which is 'thanksgiving' . . . the one sign of a healthy community involves the practices of play, celebration, and ritual. This, then is the most comprehensive framework for development. Human life in community tends to develop and elaborate patterns, games, and parties, because this is how people were made to live together. Moreover, I believe the these practices are all — sometimes unwittingly — tributes to the Good News which Christ brought into the world. For the transformation that he made possible not only liberates us to play and celebrate together, but it invites us in these very activities to anticipate the final celebration of joy and ritual associated with the marriage supper of the Lamb."

"God is working from within the multiple cultural realities of this century — from within all our little

stories. Now it is true that, although God works in culture in Christ and by the Spirit, God is not bound by culture. God stands outside of culture as well and will one day appear to judge and restore the creation and human culture. But we do not stand outside of culture. We are, through and through, cultured beings who, with God's help, strain and stretch toward the transcendent goal which God holds out for us."

"Seeing creation as divine theatre demands that, however broken this order is at present, it is toward creation itself that one looks to see 'vestiges' of the divine splendor. The creation bears traces of its creator. In Genesis, one God saw the progressive creation as 'good' – tov, a Hebrew word that includes both moral and aesthetic dimensions – and brought the work to its climax by creating an actual 'image' of divinity. And when everything was said and done, God definitely pronounced it all 'very good.'"

"When one examines the many words for beauty, splendor, glory, and goodness in Scripture . . . it is striking how many of them refer to the future of creation (and how many include the presence of justice) – what is called the New Jerusalem or heaven. Surely there are reasons why many Christians want to locate aesthetic theology in eschatology."