

## REVIEW

*Toward a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology.* By JASON A. SPRINGS. Pp. x + 234. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 978 0 19 539504 4. £45.

JASON SPRINGS'S work furthers the rehabilitation of Frei the theologian that Mike Higton and Paul DeHart have, in recent years, begun. He reveals a thinker with significant social-pragmatist instincts, governed by a thoroughly theological sensibility oriented towards God's gracious self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and so free and impelled to pursue wide-ranging ad hoc interdisciplinary engagement.

In chapter 1, Springs argues that in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* Frei sought to demonstrate 'a situated, practical sensibility for reading these stories that is first oriented by the [synoptic gospels'] stories', which would govern the choice of conceptual tools for reading them (p. 37). The use of such tools was subordinate to the work of the Holy Spirit on whom we depend for the object of the scriptural word to become luminous to us.

Chapter 2 makes a strong case for seeing substantial continuity across Frei's writings and for taking the later writings of the 1980s as making a significant contribution by bringing to maturation insights that can be traced back to his writings in the 1960s. There Frei used Gilbert Ryle's categories to clarify the ways in which the gospels portray Christ's identity in the 'publicly available, socially situated, complex interaction of character, circumstance, and theme', rather than inwardness (p. 46). Later Clifford Geertz would provide Frei with 'a social and practical framework for thinking of culture' in a way that complements this earlier emphasis (p. 51). This concern with the social and practical, however, Springs traces back to the theology of revelation Frei learnt from Barth. The incarnation and God's use of Scripture's witness to mediate Christ's presence give rise to the embodied practices that constitute the Church, requiring the theologian to attend to them.

In chapter 3 Springs, like Higton and DeHart, seeks to distinguish the theologies of Frei and George Lindbeck. Springs's particular concern is to distance Frei from Lindbeck's unfortunate metaphor of world-absorption (which appears once in Frei's corpus) and the emphasis on a comprehensive interpretative scheme that goes with it. Frei is much more reticent about

such aspirations to systematic comprehensiveness and imperial out-narration of alternative schemes. For him, the conviction that Christ's is the light that will burn the longest goes together with an eschatological humility which lends to theological claims a provisionality and revisability, subject to the freedom of God's Word, so that engagement with external perspectives is part and parcel of faith seeking understanding—and correction.

Chapter 4 refutes the charges that Frei abandons historical or theological reference in favour of a 'linguistic idealism'. The first charge has been ably dealt with by others in similar terms. Against the second Springs emphasizes Frei's Barth-like stress on God's appropriation of human language, and painstakingly demonstrates that, from as far back as his doctoral dissertation, Frei's celebration and endorsement of Barth's 'turn to analogy' is qualified by an appreciation of the continuing importance of dialectic in qualifying the use of analogy.

Chapters 5 to 8 defend Frei from a cluster of charges relating to the more explicitly social-pragmatist treatment of the literal sense in his later writing. While the writing is at times dense and there is some unnecessary repetition of argument between the chapters, they evince some of the most significant arguments of the book. Chapter 5 defends Frei from the charge that he presumes too coherent a view of the variety of Christian practice. Frei was concerned with a nonreductive, context-sensitive, flexible, and underdetermined description of the 'normative proprieties'—the binding regularities—that constitute Christian practices. Frei's account of the *sensus literalis* is an identification of family resemblances across varied practices: the minimum necessary for meaningful disagreement.

Chapter 6 draws on the conceptual inferentialism of Wilfred Sellars and Robert Brandom along with Alvin Plantinga's account of basic beliefs to argue that Frei can appeal to God's revelation as attested by Scripture without lapsing into foundationalism. Non-inferential moves like appealing to Scripture, or observing the world, which form the basis for inference, are enabled by the acquisition of conceptual skills inferentially connected to other concepts, and justified in terms of the competent use of those concepts. These non-inferential moves are not indubitably self-evident to all rational perceivers, nor are they infeasible.

Chapter 7 neatly steers Frei between reducing scriptural authority to the authority of the interpretative community—a common criticism of his work—and textual essentialism. Drawing again on Sellars and Brandom, along with Sabina

Lebivond, he argues that the coherence of Frei's account of the practice of literal reading can best be understood in social-pragmatist terms. The proprieties of the practice bind participants to its internal norms, so that community consensus is not king when it comes to interpretative disputes. Furthermore the practice includes within it objective features of the text, which exert a counter-pressure on practitioners. Chapter 8 completes this argument by claiming that for Frei God's revelation cannot be reduced to this analysis of practice; rather, for him, the practice arises from God's free employment of these texts and these reading practices to mediate the presence of the living Christ.

Altogether this is an impressive, generous, and constructive advocacy of Frei's approach to theology. The introduction indicates its overall purpose: to show that Frei exemplifies a post-liberal theology that 'provides a model for church-oriented academic theology in a religious studies context' (p. 8) by elucidating and expanding Barth's account of revelation in practical and social terms (p. 10). These claims seem warranted, yet little more is said explicitly about them. Inevitably such a study involves some compression of relevant material: Frei's criticisms of Barth do not feature, nor is the fine balance of the argument of *Types of Christian Theology* or its sympathy with Schleiermacher in evidence. Nevertheless, it successfully represents Frei as a refreshing alternative to many of the current options in theology and removes many misunderstandings along the way.

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