

external world. There is a firm frontier, not a fuzzy merging: 'Where earlier people spoke of possession by evil spirits, we think of mental illness' (*A Secular Age*, 2007, p.540). Second, these buffered individuals are imagined as moving solely within 'a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular' (*ibid.* p.542). The papers in this book are entirely within this imaginary of the immanent frame. They all conceive of the relationship between the person who prays and the addressee of the prayer as a frontier, with the prayer being conceptualized as a bridging mechanism (even if the bridge might merely loop back to whence it came). Furthermore the papers tend to collapse prayer into an instrumental act. The concern is to describe all of this, and any explanation has to be supported by the empirical data. If this is what prayer is taken to be there can indeed be a sociology of prayer just as there can be a sociology of work, family life, education or anything else we might care to mention. Consequently the specificity of prayer gets completely lost. It is just one more fact within the immanent frame, as more or less important as anything else. But maybe some things *are* more important than others.

The book is content to describe the social facts of the immanent frame. Prayer is approached as one such fact. *But is it?* The book is neither willing nor able to open up the immanent frame to what might be beyond the sociological understanding. Quite simply prayer *can* be approached as a practical refutation of the immanent frame and of the description of facts. Prayer is based on a wager on a referent beyond instrumental reason and secular time. Prayer is about what cannot be described. Ultimately then prayer is a practice which presumes a theology and cannot really be understood without it. The theology, the meaningfulness beyond the immanent frame, has to come before the description. In as much as academic sociology is entirely of and for the immanent frame it cannot say anything about the referents of prayer. Neither then can it do anything more than describe what people do when they pray. But when we pray we do much more than what can be described.

In its own terms this book is a success and a significant contribution to the academic sociology of prayer. It will be, and deserves to be, taken very seriously by the sociology of religion. The question is whether academic sociology can understand prayer. It is by no means obvious that it can.

KEITH TESTER

**POETRY AND THE RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION: THE POWER OF THE WORD**  
 edited by Francesca Bugliani Knox and David Lonsdale, *Ashgate*, Farnham,  
 2015, pp. xii + 268, £60.00, hbk

*Poetry and the Religious Imagination* contains essays derived from the first 'Power of the Word' conference sponsored by Heythrop

College, London in 2011, which aimed ‘to revisit in fresh ways the vital connections between poetry, theology and philosophy . . .’ (p.xi). The Heythrop project deliberately dissociates itself from that initiated by David Jasper and other scholars, and Michael Kirwan’s introductory essay takes a faintly combative tone in suggesting that during the last twenty years the editors of *Literature and Theology* have faltered in their declared purpose to place themselves at the heart of the literature/theology nexus (p.11). He attributes this failure to the adversarial relationship between the disciplines of literature and theology resulting from the secularising of modern culture. While it is certainly true that some publicly articulated and dogmatic forms of unbelief are unmannerly in the extreme, I have seen no sign of discourtesy in the academic Lit/Theol. arena. If the literature/theology exploration encounters problems, one suspects that it may be a result of conflicting definitions of the terms in which that exploration is to be conducted.

The very title of this book poses questions. Is poetry a smaller category than literature in general? One would suppose so, but it is not thereby a more concise one. Where does the religious imagination stand *vis-à-vis* theology? Literature and theology are academic disciplines with intellectual and intelligible content and the journal *Literature and Theology* concerns itself with those disciplines ‘and their cognate fields’. The study of literature is not the same as literature itself, just as the study of theology is not the same as God. Yet to take poetry and whatever is meant by the religious imagination is to blur distinctions and all too often to replace the important category of *affect* with merely sentimental or grandiose pronouncements like Wallace Stevens’s ‘Poetry tells us how to live our lives’, quoted in this book. Paul Fiddes, for example, writes: ‘Poetry emphasises the playful freedom of imagination, while doctrine will always seek to reduce to concepts the images and stories upon which it draws. In short, literature tends to openness and theology to closure’ (p.126). This is a disabling clutter of non-equivalent terms, expressing a very dubious sentiment. *Paradise Lost*, though the product of a majestic poetic gift and a powerful religious imagination, is not remarkable for playful openness. Besides, if theology, properly speaking, is about God, it cannot surely be vulnerable to closure of any sort. To this word-knot, Dominic Griffiths adds another strand: ‘all art is religious, in as much as it unfolds worlds, opens possibilities and enacts the will to hope’ (p.161). *Religion* here is doing a lot of jobs.

One danger is that poetic studies undertaken under the rubric of the religious imagination will suffer a thematic creep towards the devotional, which is precisely what the St. Andrews’ project wants to avoid. Otherwise, they will produce disparate studies of religious poems, which is mostly what happens in this volume. The essays vary widely in quality and relevance. Some offer excellent and absorbing treatments of particular poems, such as Olivier-Thomas Venard OP’s close reading of *Adoro te devote, latens veritas*. One should also give honourable

mention to Antonio Spadaro SJ on Ignatian imaginative prayer, which directly addresses the subject of the religious imagination. However, the collection contains several essays which should have been omitted, not, on the whole, because they are inferior to the others but because they are simply not relevant. Lilla Grindlay's fine piece on Henry Constable deserves to be published elsewhere, ideally in a journal of 16th-Century studies, where her authoritative and text-grounded work would find a more appropriate readership. John Took's erudite essay makes us eager to reread Dante, but his densely wrought style does not make clear why his chosen instances of moral instruction should be called *images*, or how they relate to the book's overall theme. Paul Fiddes's treatment of the *Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, being about ethics and justice rather than the religious imagination, does not belong either. Michael Paul Gallagher's paper on identifying a religious imagination starts off well, but strays wildly away from poetry to the visual arts, and he lengthily describes Terence Malick's 2011 film, *The Tree of Life*, full of visual beauty. One should mention that that film was criticised for having 'very little dialogue as if to preclude the possibility that humans have the power to create meaning through words', a damaging comment, and significant in that it shows to what extent the parameters of this investigation have been allowed to relax into a vague concern with art and religion generally.

Francesca Knox's introduction gives a short summary (p.3) of the above essay that could serve as a précis of what the whole volume is intended to offer. This is a benevolent plot spoiler, in that to those asking the question 'How does poetry relate to the religious imagination?' it sketches the answer before we begin. The operative image is of a space within which surprising things can happen, wherein the self can dwell. Linked to this is the idea of journey and of gift. Paul Ricoeur uses the Greek term *epoché*, where hope becomes possible and the reader can 'recover the ground of goodness'. Sometimes the space is just a space, which can in itself be beneficent, but not characterised by any sense of commitment. Rilke's place 'where poetry comes from' is something like this, as Mark Burrows's essay on Rilke and 'mystical gesture' explains. The high point of this collection comprises two fine papers. Jennifer Reek's 'Reading as Active Contemplation', about Hélène Cixous, Heidegger and Ignatius Loyola, offers a taxonomy of events within the inner space: the idea of turning, of *metanoia*, the transgression of boundaries between inner and outer, the movement within immobility and finally *Gelassenheit*—a term that Heidegger drew from Eckhart. In isolating intellectual tools for the enquiry, Reek performs a welcome service. Sarah Law's essay on Denise Levertov demonstrates how Levertov was explicitly searching after higher meanings or significances in poetry, and shows what a necessary thing is *intention* in the search for God either in reading or writing. Law demonstrates how a poet

might use the poetic endeavour to look for illumination or significances, while not necessarily claiming a religious or mystical quality for them.

The latter two essays do much to justify this volume but one doubts if the investigation can now usefully do any more than continue to produce similar articles about specific poets. A closer attention to language itself is indicated, perhaps on the lines of Rowan Williams's impressive *The Edge of Words*, with its concept of *bestowal*, of which he has written elsewhere. Knox and Law mention gift, and we remember Paul Ricoeur's *economy of gift*, central to this enquiry. Ricoeur has already prepared the ground very thoroughly and he is quoted so often in these essays that the conference might have done better explicitly to begin with his work, particularly that on biblical hermeneutics and the 'limit-expressions' of metaphor. This could have offered a more stable basis for this interesting but too fragile structured book.

CECILIA HATT

**THE ETHICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE: MORAL THEOLOGY, SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE IMAGINATION OF THE HUMAN** by Michael Banner, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, pp. 223, £ 20.00, hbk*

The first thing that draws one's attention to this latest offering by Michael Banner is the title. It jumps out at the reader because it dominates the front cover. The casual observer in a bookshop might mistake this book for a popular work of moral philosophy, designed to promote philosophy as a way of living. However, the smaller print giving the subtitle show that this is something quite different.

The nature of the project of this book becomes clear in the first chapter. In it, Banner sets out his case for 'reconceiving the practice of moral theology' (p. 7), a discipline which he views as having lost its way. This shows itself in the fact that it so often seen as a theology of hard cases, instead of an overall vision of the Christian life which speaks to the everyday situations of life, rather than simply to the moments of crisis. We should note here that the claim is not full blown anti-casuistry, but rather an attempt to put forward a moral theology which has more to say about some aspects of our lives which escape the interest of the casuists. When reading this section of the book, I could not help thinking of the Dominican moral theologian Servais Pinckaers, and his work *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. However, Pinckaers and Banner diverge significantly when it comes to proposing a solution to this crisis. For Pinckaers, the solution given is to recover the moral themes in the Scriptures, Fathers and the Western philosophical tradition; a synthesis found in the work of Aquinas. Banner does not seem much of an Aquinas fan (see phrases such as 'peeping Thomism' and 'wistful epistemological