
Matheson, P 2000 – The imaginative world of the Reformation

T & T Clark: Edinburgh. Soft Cover. 153 pages.

Reviewer: Dr G M J van Wyk (Vanderbijlpark)

The imaginative world of the Reformation is a neat publication. This soft cover book is printed on good quality paper and illustrated with several images in shades of grey. The text contains several footnotes, referring the reader to a world of information on the Reformation. Several of these contain a short but also in-depth discussion on a specific argument in the text. The publication is rounded off with a bibliography and an index of names and places. The technical quality of the publication contributes to a pleasant reading experience.

Matheson, the principal of the Theological Hall of the Uniting Church in Melbourne, and fellow of the Department of History, University of Melbourne, explains the central thesis of his book in Chapter One. He says: "The central thesis of this book is that a quite new approach to the Reformation may be required. Our current tendency towards a doctrinal approach on the one hand and to social reductionism on the other has led us into a blind alley." The author understands this as the main reason that the Reformation is viewed in almost exclusively negative terms outside the world of church or academy. He describes the harsh reality as being that "The Reformation has become a conundrum to most of us, almost an embarrassment." He states: "We can uncover the history of the Reformation, but cannot recover its meaning."

Matheson's remedy to the writing of the history of the Reformation is to amend the conventional doctrinal and social histories of the Reformation with a history of "the imaginative world of the Reformation", or as I see it, "a history of the change in metaphors during the Reformation". Matheson's main argument in this regard is that when your metaphors change, your world changes with them. But, like people, images and metaphors can and do burn out. They have to be continually renewed. The imaginative

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world of the Middle Ages, and the metaphors supporting this world, have become burnt out; in other words, they have lost their attraction to people. The merit of the Reformation has to do with the fact that it was able to successfully renew both the imaginative world and the fundamental metaphors for people who were desperately seeking the meaning of life. With this approach the author does not try to undo a whole tradition of historiography, he just wants to offer a new perspective from which one can try to understand the meaning of the Reformation and the meaning of its theology. Matheson understands that, when it comes to history, it is true that “all that I [we] say can be told another way” (words from the prologue of the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*). Matheson’s suggestion for a point of view from which one can study the meaning of the Reformation can open new perspectives for us. Up to now the Reformation was valued as a system of thought in the first place. Matheson’s approach might teach us to view the Reformation in a more fragmented, natural way. His approach might teach us that we don’t know everything about the Reformation and the rationality behind the movement, and that we don’t understand much of what we know about it. But this must not discourage us. “We don’t understand much; let us act passionately on the little that we do” (p 140).

In his examinations since 1960 of the relation between metaphors, rationality and reality, the German philosopher, Hans Blumenberg, has shown that rationality and even reality may have a metaphorical structure at times. Matheson’s project can be seen as a confirmation of the insights of Blumenberg. The metaphorical structure of the thought of the Reformation can help us to understand the reality of the Reformation as well as our own reality in a more complete way.

I have not given any attention to the content of the book in this review. Matheson covers many topics in his book, like the apocalyptic and anticlerical tendencies of the Reformation, as well as the developments in music and language. He pays attention to more controversial subjects such as the darker side of the period and visionary dimensions of the movement. Emphasis is put on personal life and spirituality.

This book is food for thought and I recommend it to anyone interested in history, theology, philosophy and language.
