Kathryn B. Alexander


Toward the end of this short, but imaginative study, Kathryn B. Alexander observes that her discussion is like spinning a diamond around and exploring its facets. It is an apt image. This book is a gem. Its refracting is almost always illuminating, only at times obscured.

Alexander’s point of departure is existential. “How can our craving for natural beauty be reconciled with human destruction of the natural world?” (3) she asks. Alas, she observes, modern Christian theology and practices often have “planted seeds of a fiercely tenacious iconoclasm” (5), tending to leave nature barren and of no account for many believers. Still, the quest for beauty in nature has not been totally eclipsed in modern Christian life. Her purpose, then, is to explore those nature-affirming sensibilities in order to show that “there is a connection between beauty in creation and the human need for salvation” (8).

She first presents us with a well-written and satisfyingly comprehensive “theological history of natural beauty” (12). This history begins with a powerful image: a crucifix in a wilderness chapel without walls. In this chapel, worshipers can contemplate that cross against an immense background of natural beauty. Many witnesses in the Christian tradition, Alexander argues, celebrated visions like this one. This chapter is fearless in its comprehensiveness, as a mere mention of the major figures in her survey shows; but it is successful in its intent. It begins with Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, then touches on the visions of theological figures like Augustine, Thomas, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis, Bonaventure, Calvin, and Edwards. Alexander then traces what she considers to be the decline of this tradition’s “Great Theory of Beauty” (13) in the modern era, the turn away from the natural beauty of God’s creation to merely subjective apperceptions of beauty. Here, for her, Kant is the most influential and the most dysfunctional theological figure.
But all is not lost, by any means. Alexander wants to show that natural beauty still has “the power to reorient the pilgrim in a proper direction, to console the pilgrim on the journey, and to reveal vestiges of a higher, divine beauty” (54). To this end, she turns to an examination of the philosophy of Josiah Royce, even though, she allows, Royce himself did not develop a fully-argued aesthetics. Royce’s philosophy, in her view, is nevertheless valuable because Royce gave expression to a vision of the Beloved Community, which now, in our ecological era, can and should be extended to include the world of nature, not just humans. She values Royce also because he championed loyalty to the Beloved Community, even in the face of life’s many “lost causes” (97). Although Alexander does mention Martin Luther King, Jr. in this context, her decision not to expound the—Roycean—implications of King’s vision of the Beloved Community for our world in crisis appears to be a missed opportunity, given the fact that Royce’s philosophy itself does not offer us the most accessible of aesthetic visions.

From the metaphysics of Royce, Alexander takes us to review the strikingly more sensuous artistic works of Andy Goldsworthy, whose creative work, she believes, “has the power or reveal natural beauty to us in a way that is vital to Christian ecological theology today” (101). Land art, she explains, is Goldsworthy’s milieu. This kind of art includes landscape art, ecological art, installations, garden architecture, and even flower arranging. It is to be contrasted with what land-artists sometimes think of as the elitist art of traditional museums, which, for those artists, is abstracted from nature and therefore is alienating. Unfortunately this book gives us no photos of Goldsworthy’s artistic creations. Still, Alexander makes Goldsworthy’s contributions take on a life of their own. The result is one of Alexander’s more compelling chapters. For Alexander, Goldsworthy helps us to see the connection between ecological and human redemption.

Alexander concludes her discussion by observing that her theological aesthetics of nature is predicated on beauty as a source of religious insight, which in turn requires an integral view of redemption for an ecological age, she believes, redemption that includes both the human and the natural world. And she points to liturgical practices as one way to “train our eyes and moral selves to see the integrity of the whole and to live out that insight in relationship” (136).

Alexander’s explorations are just that—explorations. Hers is not a systematic argument, nor an account of a grand narrative. Instead, we encounter a number of revealing refractions, which suggestively point to ways for us to rethink the theology of beauty and indeed to see in our experience of natural beauty a context in which to learn anew what redemption can mean for