

Finding beauty, goodness and truth in an ugly world A personal theological and aesthetic account

Kimberly Vrudny: *Beauty's Vineyard: A Theological Aesthetic of Anguish and Anticipation* (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2016), 264 pp.

How can one maintain and nurture a theological stance grounded in the image of God as Goodness, Beauty and Truth in a world marked by atrocious acts of violence, human evil and complicity to degrading and oppressive systems? The American theologian Kimberly Vrudny's recent book *Beauty's Vineyard* (2016) offers a personal and persuasive contribution to this perpetually topical question by outlining a theological aesthetic that strives both to open avenues for attenuating the anguish experienced in face of our current unjust world and to foster hope and anticipation for a future, more just and peaceful human community – *Beauty's Vineyard*.

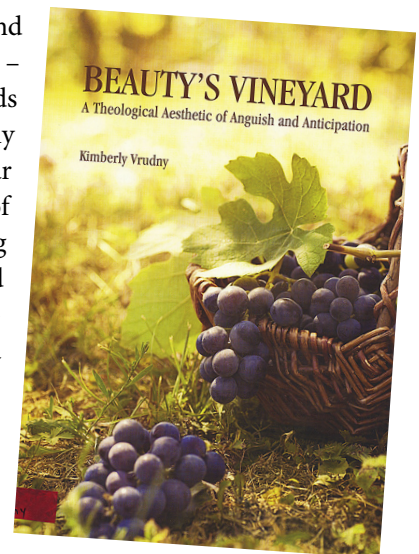
The book is described as 'part spiritual memoir, part systematic theology' – a characterisation that, having finished reading it, turns out to be an apt portrayal. It does indeed present a robust systematisation of theological aesthetics, anchoring its analysis both in the thinking of classical theologians and philosophers (above all Thomas Aquinas) and in contemporary discussions pertaining to fields such as christological, soteriological and ecclesiological research. However, the scholarly investigation takes shape in close dialogue with Vrudny's own life narrative and a reflexive analysis of her own personal and spiritual development. Hence one cannot escape the impression of being personally addressed, and at times challenged and moved, by this study.

In the first chapter, Vrudny portrays her personal journey from what she describes as the 'glass box of fundamentalism into which I had been born and raised' – that is, a conservative Lutheran denomin-

ation supporting a strict and literal reading of the Bible – towards the position she finds herself in today: as a socially engaged Catholic scholar with a strong awareness of and dedication to fighting poverty, discrimination and abuse in her own US context as well as globally. As a young student, the fundamentalist-leaning religious views of her childhood were shattered as she studied in Israel, facing not only the diversity and richness of human

existential positions but also war and suffering, and, above all, as she discovered a scholarly, interpretative way of approaching the Bible. Later on, Vrudny has travelled and worked in several communities around the world marked by oppression and injustice, such as Palestine, South Africa and Mexico, exposing her theological thinking to tangible experiences of fighting HIV/AIDS, famine and social abuse. The personal tragedy of losing an unborn child is also woven in to the reflexive-theological narrative, which despite its contours of anguish and agony ends on a more positive note of anticipation and determination.

The 'red thread' running through the following chapters, outlining Vrudny's position at the crossroads of aesthetics and theology, is the concept of beauty, described as a profound, transcendental aspect of all human beings, closely related to such ethical dimensions as compassion, justice and wisdom. Each chapter is dedicated to a special theological theme – for example creation and creativity,



imago Dei, sin, suffering, the interpretation of parables, and hope – and paints an image of how the ‘Beauty’s Vineyard’ alluded to in the title could be envisioned. A distinguishing feature of the presentation is that each chapter takes the form of a conversation with a painting, selected by Vrudny, on the respective theme. Thus, each chapter starts with a high-quality reproduction of a painting accompanied by a presentation of the artwork, the artist and the author’s relation to, and reflections on, the painting. These paintings portray no idyllic landscapes, or romantic scenes of beauty, but are mostly contemporary realistic or symbolic depictions of violence, fear, fright and abandonment. While the dialogue form works well in some chapters, illuminating and embodying the theoretical claims in an aesthetically and ethically compelling way, the link remains somewhat obscure and undeveloped in others. Overall, however, this is an ingenious narrative technique, well suited for the topic under investigation.

Vrudny presents her arguments in a clear and comprehensive way, which reveals a thorough knowledge of the theoretical and philosophical sources, as well as a robust familiarity with both Jewish and Christian (Catholic as well as Protestant) exegetic traditions. A European scholar of religion (such as myself) may at first feel somewhat estranged by the religiously-coloured language of the book and will perhaps anticipate a more secular and unattached address in a work of academic literature. However, the presentation style goes hand in hand with the strongly reflexive character of the book in general. As such, the book can be read as a contribution to the budding trends of auto-ethnography and creative writing, which at the moment are emerging as critical and innovative approaches in theological research as well as in the humanities at large. Thus, the book offers a fresh and intriguing contribution to the research field of theological aesthetics. It ought to interest students and scholars of systematic and practical theology as well as religious studies and will certainly also speak to laypersons and clergy active within a variety of Christian communities. ■

RUTH ILLMAN

Ruth Illman is docent of comparative religion at Åbo Akademi University and Director of the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, Turku, Finland.