

1-1-2007

Dearborn, Kerry. Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald. Burlington, VT and Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2006. 199 pages.

Bonnie Gaarden

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind>

Recommended Citation

Gaarden, Bonnie (2007) "Dearborn, Kerry. Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald. Burlington, VT and Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2006. 199 pages.," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 26 , Article 8. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol26/iss1/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact sarah.titus@snc.edu.

Book Reviews

Dearborn, Kerry. *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald*. Burlington, VT and Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2006. 199 pages.

Bonnie Gaarden

All lovers of MacDonald should rejoice that, finally, a book devoted to a comprehensive examination of his theology has been published, and it is excellent. Dearborn examines the influences on MacDonald's theology and presents the theology itself in a clear, balanced manner. She centers her discussion around the concept, so central to MacDonald, of apprehending divine truth through the imagination.

The book has a triangular structure of seven chapters. Three chapters cover major contributors to MacDonald's religious thinking. The center of the book, chapter four, describes what the author calls MacDonald's "theology of the imagination." Then the last three chapters trace how this theology shapes MacDonald's concepts of God, of humanity, and of life's negatives: suffering, aging and death.

Each chapter is written in the form of an extended outline, so the thread of the author's thought is easy to follow.

The first chapter presents the formative influences of MacDonald's childhood: on one hand, the Federal Calvinism of his family's church affiliation and, on the other, their Celtic heritage, transmitted to MacDonald largely through his idolized father. Dearborn observes that MacDonald early rebelled against Calvinism's wrathful, arbitrary God, its legal model of divine-human relation, and its distrust of imagination and the arts. However, the Calvinistic concept of God's "otherness" and absolute transcendence left MacDonald wary of ever presuming to define God and his early church training convinced him of the need to eradicate the sin in one's life. His father's Celtic Christianity gave MacDonald tolerance, a desire for unity, a tradition of generosity, love of learning and poetry, openness to the supernatural, a sacramental vision of God's relationship to nature, and a high valuation of community.

The second chapter examines some of the literary influences MacDonald encountered in the course of his youth and education: after a brief nod to Plato the author discusses how the thought of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Novalis were, for MacDonald, the most significant of the British and European

Romantics. The material on Novalis is particularly welcome, since he is generally not well known among MacDonald's English and American readers. Dearborn not only sketches important ideas MacDonald and Novalis held in common, but also observes contrasts between the two, such as MacDonald's greater emphasis on ethics and obedience (not just artistic creativity) as necessary for knowledge of God. She also observes, following Prickett, that the Romanticism of Coleridge and Wordsworth was a "minority tradition" which retained a basically Christian worldview.

The third chapter reviews MacDonald's British theological influences: Alexander Scott, Thomas Erskine, John Campbell, and, above all, F. D. Maurice. After a brief description of MacDonald's relationships with these men, Dearborn focuses on the thought of Maurice as representing the primary theological emphases common to this heterodox group: they distrusted theological systems and centered their theology around the concept of the Trinity. They saw Jesus as presented in the Bible as the revelation both of God's character and of true humanity. They believed in the primacy of love in God, that God's love requires sin's destruction, that Christ atoned for the sins of all people, that all humanity belongs to the family of Christ's church, and that God, in the Bible and in nature, speaks symbolically to the human imagination. All these ideas were important to MacDonald.

In chapter four, Dearborn explicates "MacDonald's Theology of the Imagination," drawing particularly from two essays in *A Dish of Orts*: "The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture" and "The Fantastic Imagination." MacDonald, she says, saw imagination as a characteristic of God, the "inside," if you will, of God's radical initiative in creation, his freedom, empathy, ability to bring good out of evil, and the redemptive quality even of his judgment. Nature is God's art, so meaning is inherent in reality; the human imagination does not create so much as discover the meaning God has put into the visible world. Therefore the human imagination is a vehicle of truth, *so long as* it is informed by God's creation: the universe is sacramental and to the true imagination reveals not only God, but also ourselves. Ethics and imaginative vision are related, in that the more closely a person conforms to God's truth in his moral being, the better he will be able to see God in the world around him. The imagination perceives polarity (the unity behind opposites) and motivates the obedience that, for MacDonald, constitutes faith. While a "wise" imagination is an architect of truth (where the rational intellect is merely a laborer) an imagination separated from the truth of God becomes mere "fancy," which busies itself with ornamentation, emotional manipulation, and the creation of

falsities.

In chapter five, Dearborn examines MacDonald's use of imaginative writing to encourage theological transformation and to present his readers with a Christ-centered image of God. Liberally providing extended examples from MacDonald's texts, particularly his fantasies, she shows how MacDonald created stories to, first, confront people with the implications of the dominant, quasi-Calvinist theology and its picture of a legalistic vindictive God, and then to counter these implications with a positive vision of a fatherly/motherly God, relational and personal, who provides and loves unconditionally, who is the source of freedom and unity, to whom obedience is not mechanical law keeping, but continued growth into the sacrificial love which is the heart of Christ and of the Father who sent him.

Chapter six discusses MacDonald's view of what it means to be human. Christ shows God's "thought" in creating humanity, and MacDonald believed that individuals reach their teleological Christlikeness through worship, obedience, and community. In silent, solitary worship we can encounter and experience God's tender approachability and our own profound dependence. Obedience, for MacDonald, *is* religious faith, as well as the one necessary foundation for religious belief. To be obedient is to be good, and to be good requires freedom from self-centeredness, from possessiveness, and from fear. It requires freedom for service and for the expression of one's individuality. True community is based on the fact that every individual is a member of God's family. Community is developed as people practice the mutually reinforcing disciplines of *being* like Christ in offering one another unconditional love, and *seeing* Christ in their fellows, even the unlovely: "In seeing Christ's face in others, one will be given his face of radiant love" (146).

Chapter seven, on aging, suffering, and death, elucidates MacDonald's view of suffering as the fire of God's love that consumes the evil in people, evil being no thing-in-itself but only a privation of or parasite upon the good. God, says MacDonald, willingly suffers with his people in order to bring them to birth as his own sons and daughters, sharers of his own divinely loving nature. MacDonald sees aging as weakening the body to strengthen the soul, and imagines death as entering God's own country, waking from a dream, rejoining lost loved ones. For MacDonald, spiritual education continues after death, perhaps in the form of continued suffering (which is hell) or the self-imposed isolation of "the outer darkness," but the suffering only lasts until the sufferer repents and moves toward God. Dearborn observes that universalism (the conviction that all will eventually repent and be saved) is the logical conclusion

of MacDonald's thinking, even while pointing out that he never makes this a dogmatic statement, but offers it as a "hope." MacDonald's heaven, in contrast to many Christian images, is "dynamic and glorious," a place of "wondrous creativity" where human relationships, though continued from earthly life, are transformed.

In her conclusion, Dearborn notes that MacDonald's writing is too literary to be theologically clear and precise, while literary critics complain that he is too concerned with communicating theological concepts to achieve literary excellence. She sees his accomplishments as, first, creating a Christ-centered theology that imaginatively perceives Jesus as the bridge between subjectivity and objectivity, transcendence and immanence, and, second, using the "incarnational" technique of conveying theology through narrative. MacDonald's emphasis on the human need to incarnate divine truth in obedience, she says, corrects both the abstractness inherent in theological "systems" and the shortcomings of "moral relativism, cheap grace and situation ethics" (177). She sees him as a model for today because he achieved the balance of being open to truth wherever it is found, while remaining anchored in the basics of the Christian revelation. Observing that his notions of God as tender and motherly, the atonement as universal, and nature as divine self-expression have today found wide acceptance in the Church, she concludes that his thought was more prophetic than heretical.

The scholarly apparatus of the book makes it very helpful for serious researchers: not only does Dearborn document and elucidate her text with extensive footnotes, but she provides five separate bibliographies listing: 1) works by MacDonald, 2) anthologies of MacDonald's texts, 3) books by/about writers who influenced MacDonald, 3) bibliographies, letters, and critical pieces related to MacDonald, and 4) general works dealing with ideas important in MacDonald's thought. A reader will find some familiarity with evangelical/Reformed theology useful in reading the text, but the book is so free of jargon that such a background isn't mandatory.

Dearborn's achievement in this text, and its value for MacDonald studies, is so impressive that pointing out gaps in it seems like carping. After all, as a fellow scholar remarked to me in an e-mail, no one book can say everything! But I do think that, in her interest in presenting MacDonald as a reasonably orthodox Christian theologian (and I agree that he was) Dearborn fails to do justice to his Sophianic mysticism, nourished by Bohem and Swedenborg, that emphasizes God's *effectively redeeming* presence in all creation. While, as far as I know, it's quite true that MacDonald never expressed his universalist hope

as a dogmatic statement, I think that hope is more central to his theological vision than she articulates, for it is a clear consequence of his most fundamental ideas about the nature of God and the nature of humanity.

For instance, in his sermon “Love Thine Enemy,” MacDonald declares that all people, in the “absolute reality of their being,” are “of one nature with us, even the divine nature,” and the evil in a person is simply a “fog” obscuring the imperishable diamond of his true self. In “The New Name” he suggests that the white stone in Revelation, given to each of the redeemed, symbolizes the purity and indestructibility of the true self, God’s “idea” of us. In *Robert Falconer* and elsewhere, he says that the eternal persistence of any soul in misery would be so great a grief to souls in heaven as to vitiate their blessedness. MacDonald’s universalist hope appears in countless ways throughout his writing and is founded in one of his central convictions: the essential unity between God and humanity which is revealed in Christ. Though it certainly puts him in a “minority tradition” of Christian theology, this conviction marks a thorough consistency in MacDonald’s own thought that I would have liked to see more explicitly presented in Dearborn’s book.

Nonetheless, it’s a great book, and deserves to be read by anyone interested in MacDonald’s relationship to Christian theology.