

Book review | Susanne Wigorts Yngvesson

Ethics and Christian musicking – Negotiation and practice of norms and values

Myrick, Nathan & Porter, Mark (2021) *Ethics and Christian musicking*. London and New York: Routledge.

To the average worship participant, if such a person even exists, hymns and songs are a natural and appreciated part of the liturgy in much of the Christian world. Texts and tunes have been formed through centuries of use and informed by singing praxis. Both the musical aspects and the lyrics may have ethical dimensions that Christian congregations of all church traditions would do well to reflect upon. Why do we sing in the way we do? Why have certain musical expressions and forms been favoured above others? And what underlying political agendas are conveyed?

In the anthology *Ethics and Christian musicking*, several relevant ethical questions are discussed. These questions both challenge and affirm liturgical practices and the norms that may have shaped them. This anthology is part of the *Congregational music studies series* by Routledge. It is divided into four sections. In the following review, I reflect on a selection of contributions. Before doing so, it is perhaps worthwhile commenting on the overarching framework. It is challenging to find a consistent thread throughout, a challenge not specific to this anthology, but to anthologies in general. Each writer has their own focus, and as an editor, one aims to gather those with expertise in a specific area. That said, the strength of this anthology lies precisely in the diversity of aspects it addresses, allowing the reader to choose the most relevant topics without losing the main theme argument. However, it is not entirely clear why the four sections are structured the way they are, even though this division is at least partially explicated in the introduction. As an example, the articles in the first section (“The body and beyond”) are separated from section three (“Identity and encounter”), despite the fact that the content in the first section also deals with identity, and

articles in the third section also address the body. This is, of course, a minor issue, although it does make the book somewhat difficult to navigate.

The editors, Nathan Myrick (Townsend School of Music) and Mark Porter (University of Erfurt), are highly qualified and well-versed in research on ethics and Christian music. Previous publications include Myrick's book *Music for others: Care, justice, and relational ethics in Christian music* (2021) and Porter's *Ecologies of resonance in Christian musicking* (2020). Both are thus well-suited to compile an anthology of this nature, although it seems unfortunate that they do not contribute with their own chapters. The anthology reflects a focus on music and ethics as praxis rather than theory or dogma. Furthermore, their introductory chapter provides an excellent and engaging overview of previous research as well as justifications for why certain issues are more important to discuss than others.

As an ethicist and systematic theologian myself, I miss the inclusion of more abstract theoretical aspects; more specifically the underlying theoretical assumptions that are the foundations of the discussions. That said, I will not dwell on what is missing. The anthology's fifteen authors, in addition to the editors, are primarily affiliated with institutions in England and the USA, with a few from the Netherlands and Australia. Collectively, they represent a diversity of academic disciplines and Christian backgrounds. Some authors have practical experience in liturgy and church music; others do not.

It is impossible for the reviewer to summarise an overarching conclusion about the entirety of the anthology, beyond the obvious point indicated by its title: *Ethics and Christian musicking*, a comment also affirmed by the editors in the introduction. The ambition is to discuss how ethics is "constantly immanent in the undertakings of individuals, groups, and communities". Myrick and Porter argue that traditions and ethics "are in a constant process of negotiation and contestation." The contributors, therefore, engage with a concept of ethics that is rooted in negotiating practices rather than an abstract notion or norm of what is desirable. In this sense, the ethics discussed are performative and descriptive rather than prescriptive.

On examining individual articles, however, there are, in fact, numerous theoretical assumptions about ethics that illustrate how challenging it is to separate theoretical frameworks from the practical functions of ethics. Furthermore, several articles discuss how norms and ethics are transmitted through Christian music in an almost invisible manner. Texts and certain ways of singing have become so established that they are not questioned. But this invisibility can involve racist, sexist, commercial, or discriminatory

practices. Andrew Mall, for example, demonstrates how Christian music festivals and streaming services are intertwined with commercial profit interests: “Christian music has remained an important market sector for the multinational music industries”. Mall also raises an important question: “What values does capitalism itself reward and incentivize?” The underlying context may also indirectly influence which music is promoted, and which is silenced, depending on various political and commercial factors.

Another article that partially touches on similar issues is Tanya Riches’ and Alexander Douglas’s discussion on Black identity within the Hillsong megachurch. They explore whether African-American individuals feel included in this tradition, which has its roots in a “Western totalizing institution”. According to their study, which involves in-depth interviews, the answer is yes; those who identify as African-American do feel included in the Christian Hillsong congregation. The authors demonstrate that questions of tradition, race, and identity involve complex interactions among various mechanisms that are not easily categorized in advance.

The third article I want to highlight is the first contribution by Marcell Silva Steuernagel: *Praise, politics, power: Ethics of the body in Christian musicking*. He begins with an engaging anecdote about an experience with Southern Baptists in Texas: “I start bobbing my head [to the music], a small movement that escalates into full bodily interaction with the music”. After a while, he notices that his way of moving is not well-received: “I’m moving way too much”. Drawing from this experience, Steuernagel discusses body ethics in Christian music traditions. He explores how one negotiates and understands the use of the body, beyond just singing with lips, lungs, and mouth. His investigation broadly traces the roots of this question, from ancient times to the present. Culturally, differing human corporeal responses to music exist across the globe. Steuernagel’s conclusion can, nevertheless, be interpreted as somewhat separatist. On the one hand, by consciously embracing differences, many and various practices can better be accepted and understood. On the other hand, he seems to contradict himself with a stereotypical categorization. He argues that “the Global South has good reasons for departing from Euro-American normativities of musicking in order to resist the body ethics of Western Christianity explored here [...]”. While Steuernagel’s article is thought-provoking and educational, I question his conclusion. Is there a coherent term today that can be summarised as “Western Christianity”? If so, what does it look, sound, and feel like? I agree with his point in essence but believe that his concluding argument represents a problematic categorization of Christian practices in what is often called the West.

According to Myrick and Porter, a goal of this anthology is to inspire more conscious ethical reflection on ethics and Christian musicking. I believe they have achieved this aim. They have an additional ambitious aim concerned with the content and negotiation of ethics in Christian musicking, namely “an ethical approach to practice is one that is self-conscious of its various ethical dimensions, and which seeks to develop practices going forward that are informed by this awareness”. Here, my inner ethicist is stirred, as I would have liked to read more about what they theoretically mean by “self-conscious” and “awareness” within a Christian theological tradition, since they choose to use these complex concepts. Nevertheless, my question indicates that they have succeeded in their ambition to contribute to reflection on “various ethical dimensions”.