
William P. Brown, Professor of Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary/PSCE in Richmond, Virginia and a scholar well known for his interest and work in wisdom literature, attends here to what has been called the “strangest book of the Bible,” the book of Ecclesiastes (Heb. Qoheleth). Identified largely with the refrain “vanity of vanities” (e.g., 1:2; 12:8) and the poem about time (3:1-8) made famous by Pete Seeger and the Byrds with their mid-1960s recording of “Turn, Turn, Turn,” Ecclesiastes is scarcely represented in lectionaries and generally underused in preaching and teaching. This is due, at least in part, to a widespread negative bias against “Qoheleth’s rampant skepticism and despairing tone” (viii), a bias Brown admits he shared when he set to work on this commentary. What Brown discovered and skillfully demonstrates for his readers, however, is that the ancient sage offers a “wealth of insight” that invites fruitful theological reflection.

In the introduction, Brown traces Ecclesiastes from its prehistory in ancient Near Eastern wisdom to its inclusion in the Hebrew Scriptures. He begins this “journey of Ecclesiastes” with a retelling of the Epic of Gilgamesh, an old Mesopotamian tale about a legendary king who set out to find purpose within the limitations of human existence. The epic, Brown claims, served as the foundation, or “groundwork,” for Qoheleth’s search for meaning. Next, Brown locates Ecclesiastes historically in the Persian/early Hellenistic periods, a time marked by cultural malaise, socioeconomic turmoil, and profound anxiety. Qoheleth’s realistic and at points incongruous perspectives on life in that context would later prompt controversy over the book’s canonical status. Brown then sets Ecclesiastes within the heterogeneous wisdom corpus (with Proverbs and Job), distinguishing Qoheleth as an eclectic master of sapiential rhetoric, a sage who oscillates between “the conventional and the subversive, the classical and the radical like a pendulum swinging back and forth between contradictions” (13). A discussion about the literary structure and the integrity of the book follows. Finally, Brown suggests that one way to navigate Qoheleth’s “inner disputational” discourse is to take seriously that he is on a quest (see 1:12-13); as such, Qoheleth’s observations are provisional, continually revised, and arranged in a way to provoke dialogue among his readers.

Brown’s commentary on the text is eminently readable. He weaves an analysis of the text that is thorough, informed by the most recent scholarship on Ecclesiastes, and attentive to how Qoheleth’s voice is in conversation with the larger biblical witness. He examines Qoheleth’s teaching methods and highlights persistent themes that he believes render “a coherent theological and ethical orientation, but one unlike anything encountered elsewhere in biblical wisdom, much less throughout the Old Testament” (12). Among those themes are the fragility of human existence, the limitations of human perception, the certainty of death, the inscrutability and sovereignty of God, the inability of humans to control life, the value of work, the relative advantage of wisdom, and Qoheleth’s repeated urging to enjoy—carpe diem (“seize the day”) “before death seizes the self” (93).
Brown further puts Qoheleth in dialogue with more contemporary writers such as Pearl S. Buck, Mark Twain, Kathleen Norris, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Barbara Kingsolver. Throughout, Brown adeptly intertwines exegetical insights with thought-provoking homiletical musings.

Brown concludes with an epilogue (as per Eccl 12:9-14) in which he explores how Christians may reflect on and appropriate the book. In contrast to those who consider Ecclesiastes merely “a foil for the Gospel message, a deficient and dangerous perspective in dire need of rehabilitation” (121), Brown seeks to discern how Qoheleth’s thought enriches, and folds into, biblical teaching and thus into the “heart and soul of Christian reflection” (122). The epilogue is a series of observations structured around the themes of death, the purpose of history, gain and gift, joy and sorrow, work and vocation, knowledge of God, and knowledge of self. For each theme, Brown emphasizes the distinctiveness of Qoheleth’s theology and points to ways in which Ecclesiastes is echoed, developed, or even radicalized by New Testament writers. The result is a heuristic model of integrative and constructive theological engagement with Qoheleth’s thought.

In sum, Brown’s commentary invites and enables readers to reintroduce themselves to the perplexing and often disparaged book of Ecclesiastes, to ponder anew the deliberations of a “canonical misfit.” Such an invitation is both welcome and timely, particularly given our own “age of disillusionment,” anxieties about work and money, frustrations with the loss of justice in the land, and preoccupation with controlling the world around us. For those today on the ancient yet perennial quest for meaning, Brown holds out Qoheleth as an apt point of departure. For those who want to know more about Qoheleth, Brown’s commentary is an excellent place to begin.

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Whenever people decide to undertake a job or project, create or make something, there is a strong tendency to seek and procure the most efficient tools—tools that are the most helpful and most reliable, have clear instructions, make the job easier and more pleasant, and produce good results. Similar tools are sought out for teaching, preaching, spiritual direction, better communication, and knowledge of faith or sharing of that faith.

Arland Hultgren’s new book The Parables of Jesus is definitely that kind of high-caliber versatile tool. A real commentary on the parables has been long awaited and sorely needed. Genuinely new and attractive, the commentary contains an abundance of parable research that comprehensively covers all the parables in the Synoptic Gospels, Q, and the Gospel of Thomas.

The commentary makes readily accessible traditions of interpretation, helpful references to the Hebrew Scriptures, rabbinic writings, pre-Christian and Christian writings, Josephus, and the church fathers; writings on parables from Guthrie (1866) to Longenecker (2000), and virtually everything in between. Hultgren is respectful of that scholarship which has enlightened and given insight to an ongoing pursuit of parable study.

Hultgren clearly explains where he is coming from and where he is going. He refers to two historical realities about Jesus of Nazareth—that he was crucified and that he spoke in parables. Hultgren’s basic definition of a parable is that it is “a comparison between eternal transcendental realities and that which was familiar to human experience” (2).

Other and varied definitions abound. Hultgren narrows down two types of parables: narrative parables (“once upon a time”) and similitudes or comparisons (“is
like, “or “as if”). He chooses to interpret the parables primarily for the sake of making the gospel parables of Jesus understood within the Christian church, fully aware that the parables continue to stir up interpretations and that none are final or exhaustive (1-18).

In the voluminous literature of recent years, parable studies focus on various aspects: listening, hearing, preaching, literary-historical methodology, psychological, anthropological, cultural and social. Hultgren’s commentary opens up a wide vista of what has already been done in parable study over the centuries. Why do scholars agree on certain interpretations? Why do they disagree and differ? What is authentically “original” parable tradition and what represents a later addition? Hultgren’s purpose is to present a synthesis of the essential meaning of the parables in the context of the canonical gospels where they are found for proclamation.

It is refreshing to find only eighteen pages of introduction. Hultgren lays a solid foundation by his identification and classification of parables in a neat, six-point description of their distinctive elements. He provides a succinct explanation of the three major questions regarding the interpretation of the parables: (1) What is the role of allegory? (2) Does one interpret the “original” parable of Jesus or the parable as found in the gospel? (3) What methodology is most necessary and fruitful?

Next, he goes directly to all the parables that he classifies in meaningful and easily identifiable categories: (1) parables of the revelation of God—those of God’s extraordinary forgiveness and grace and those of God’s extraordinary love for the lost; (2) parables of exemplary behavior; (3) parables of wisdom; (4) parables of life before God (being in the presence of God); (5) parables of final judgment; (6) allegorical parables; and (7) parables of the kingdom.

Hultgren begins every parable with notes on the text and translation that are extremely helpful; for example, the warnings: “the passage has major textual problems” or “the syntax is difficult.” Major textual traditions are listed; attention is called to important Greek witnesses that may not contain a passage or word, or is read differently (22, 235). Likewise, important Greek words are noted: e.g., is the Greek word doulos to be translated “slave” or “servant”? He also gives several commonly used English versions (RSV, NIV, NRSV, JB, TEV, NEB) for many texts.

The next step is the exegetical commentary for each parable as it is used in one or more of the gospels. Here Hultgren offers a comprehensive, exegetical, theological analysis of the parable after he places it within the context of the gospel in which it is found, and in the Gospel of Thomas if found there. His interpretation is enhanced and made more meaningful by exegesis focusing on: (1) key words (“king,” “lord,” “master”); (2) the audience to whom the parable is addressed; (3) historical, cultural, or legal clarification, i.e., the role of a tax collector, the meaning of “steward,” the value of a talent (24-26, 275); (4) good comparison of translations from five or six English versions; (5) helpful visual aids in the form of diagrams or tables, so that one can see at a glance and study in detail how a parable differs in each of the gospels and the Gospel of Thomas, as in the parable of the sower (184-186), the parable of the wicked tenants (358), or the parable of the wedding feast and great banquet (334); (6) interesting exegesis of Jesus’ meaning in the parable and then its use in the gospels regarding discipleship response as in the comparison of Matthew’s parable of the talents and Luke’s parable of the pounds (277-280).

Another good feature very noticeable in the exegetical commentary is Hultgren’s linking the parable with other New Testament writings (280) or Hebrew writings (305-306), referring to the use of parable metaphors in pre-Christian or non-Christian writings (307). In the longer and more detailed parables of final judgment or parables of the kingdom, Hultgren gives special attention to the theme, message, and purpose.
of the parable itself, without the appended interpretation.

The final judgment parable found only in Matt 25:31-46 is a fine example of Hultgren’s meticulous exegesis and interpretation, so helpful for understanding the value of his commentary (310-326). He describes this passage as an apocalyptic discourse with a parabolic element; he gives the names of other titles used; its connection with other apocalyptic texts both biblical and non-biblical; he explains key words and terms, such as “all nations” (universal judgment), “stranger,” and “least of my brothers and sisters.” He clarifies and gives references for the Hebrew and Greek understanding of the “good deeds” enumerated, the deeds which are the basis of judgment, again with connections to ancient examples of conduct referred to; and finally the Christology evident in the titles given to the universal judge.

Beautifully set in this parable is a gem of Hultgren’s interesting and delightful methodology of dealing with modern popular facile but faulty interpretations. He very clearly lists and explains the erroneous interpretations with formidable research, building up suspense to a climactic evaluation and conclusion that is quite devastating to what seemed promising (318-326). Similar clarifications appear in his discussions of the parable of two sons (223) and the friend at midnight (230-233).

After the exegetical commentary on each parable, Hultgren gives an exposition. It is not lengthy, but it manifests critical thinking and theological insights from his years of teaching, ministry, and reflections in a powerful and challenging way. Hultgren makes the particular parable studied very vital and relevant to our own faith response to Jesus; it encourages a more dynamic growth and more generous self-giving discipleship.

The last section of Hultgren’s commentary contains one important chapter, “The Parables in the Gospel of Thomas,” which contains fourteen parables with synoptic parallels, all of which were dealt with in the exegetical commentary. In this chapter, however, Hultgren presents an interesting and remarkable way for the reader to come to a broader understanding of the development of early Christianity, theological and biblical trajectories, and gnostic influence. Hultgren offers a new look at the Gospel of Thomas, perspectives about its dating, its view of the kingdom of God, and its relationship to the canonical Synoptic Gospels. Added is also an excellent bibliography of books and pertinent articles.

Finally, Appendix 1 offers “The purpose of Parables according to the Evangelists.” It is a fascinating treatment of the age-old question of why Jesus taught the crowds in parables, while the disciples had been given the “secret of the kingdom of God.” Hultgren explains Mark’s enigmatic text, Matthew’s and Luke’s alterations; again, he includes a useful bibliography (453-467). Appendix 2 deals with the “Three Parables in Luke 15.” Appendix 3 briefly explains “doulos—servant or slave.” At the end of the commentary there is a well-selected bibliography on the parables of Jesus, an index of Scripture references, an index of other ancient sources, and an index of modern authors.

Hultgren’s commentary is an excellent text for scholars, teachers, clergy and lay ministers, and graduate students of theology. It places at one’s fingertips all the parables, each with textual notes, scholarly exegetical commentary, a solid exposition, and a very useful bibliography.

Hultgren is to be highly commended for giving us a much-needed and most genuinely valuable tool and source for understanding and living the teaching of Jesus. His vibrant biblical-theological scholarship gives depth and currency to the transformational message of the parables.

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A new theology begins with Barth and ends with music. The observation speaks oodles—or possibly nothing at all. Radical Orthodoxy concludes with a metaphysically complex argument by Catherine Pickstock, author of After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy (1997), for the ontic primacy of music, so argued because music and harmony, in the western (Platonic-Christian) tradition, “holds in balance time and space under transcendence” (269). The collection of essays begins with John Milbank criticizing Barth for allowing philosophy an autonomous realm, and for in fact using the outcomes of this realm, in their post-Kantian manifestation, to neo-orthodox advantage by declaring that since natural reason reveals nothing of God, it must be God that reveals God in events comprehended by faith. The critique is not surprising, given Milbank’s contention in Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (1990), that western social theory is actually a series of Christian heresies, and that all secular knowledge is questionable as such. He instead posits a neo-Platonic “participationist” view of reason, reason as participation in the mind of God (knowledge by faith alone), that denies the divorce of revelation from reason, and brings natural reason back into the theological fold as itself a form of revelation.

Milbank, formerly of Cambridge University, is now the Francis Ball Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Virginia. His Theology and Social Theory has been touted as the only thorough treatment of the relation between theology and social theory from Plato to Deleuze. Certainly it is radical in its critique and orthodox in its leanings. The same can be said of Catherine Pickstock, whose After Writing is both radical in its definition of what “culminates” philosophy, art, and life, and orthodox in its defense of the traditional Mass. Finally, Graham Ward, in Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Philosophy, is both radical in his emphasis on the fundamental role of “discourse” and his appropriation of Derrida, and orthodox (neo?) in his focus on Barth. Thus all three editors exemplify their self-proclaimed movement, at least at the titular level.

Yet any modern or postmodern reader of such a work is bound to be suspicious of such a project, especially bound to question the use of words like “radical,” “orthodox,” and “new.” How is it that a group can both be doing “new” theology and be aware of that work? Is this not the mark of a divided self, a self discovering itself as it “selves” itself? And what are the hidden motivations, the plays for power, intrinsic to such a movement? What is the violence done in proclaiming a radically orthodox theology? In naming itself, what are the aspects of itself that it hides?

The project definition is strongly worded. “Radical orthodoxy reclaims the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework. Not simply returning in nostalgia to the premodern world, these essays visit sites in which secularism has invested heavily—aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space—and re-situates them from a Christian standpoint; that is, in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the church and the Eucharist. What emerges is a contemporary theological project made possible by the superficiality of today’s secularism” (1). A rather sweeping proclamation, for their programmatic includes both the deconstruction of a secularism replete with deconstructionist, even nihilistic, tendencies, and then a paradigmatic shift that reconstructs a whole host of areas, situating them (resurrecting them?) theologically.

Furthermore, this deconstructive/reconstructive program has both a camp and a script. While the essays remain ostensibly topical, they also go about the business of reclaiming and declaiming certain figures in the history of theological and philosophical thought. So the camp. Credal Christian-
ity and the “exemplarity of its patristic matrix” are affirmed (2). The Bible itself plays a limited role. In spite of its claim to not be returning in nostalgia to a premodern world, radical orthodoxy is “orthodox” because it excavates and re-appropriates what it perceives as a purportedly coherent Christian worldview that was somehow lost in the late middle ages. Thus the radical orthodox school, itself born out of a largely Catholic and Anglican milieu, finds considerable fault with Protestant biblicism and post-tridentine Catholic positivist authoritarianism, and seeks a repristinated theology that looks to figures like Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, and Anselm for its sources of coherence. Radical orthodoxy nevertheless distances itself further from other orthodox movements by declaring itself separate from the modern Thomist movement. And though it shares much with Barthian neo-orthodoxy, it takes issue with the Barthian tendency towards plodding exegesis, instead seeking to “mingle exegesis, cultural reflection and philosophy in a complex but coherently executed collage” (2). The goal is to be more mediating, but less accommodating.

The script, or meta-narrative, of the radical orthodox school is easily summarized. They state, “the central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is ‘participation’ as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God” (3). This can sometimes amount to simply asserting, “Scotus bad, Aquinas good; Ockham bad, Augustine good.” Representative of this view is Hemming in his treatise on “Nihilism,” where he states, “the radical departure signified by Ockham and brought to fruition by Descartes is that ‘to live’ is possible apart from world or creation such that world or creation then become objects... which have to be explained subsequent to my discovery that I live, rather than being the conditioning possibility for any explanation at all” (93). This means, consequently, that God can be understood as an object of theological investigation, thus subsuming both Creator and creation under the same determination, “being.” This being the case, it is, according to Hemming (and later Blond, in an article on “Perception”), only a short step away to a personalized and interiorized understanding of revelation, because creation (in a betrayal of Aquinas) loses its analogical import. This is exactly the understanding of revelation and the relation between creator and Creation they argue is worked out by Ockham (234).

What both Hemming and Blond are lamenting is the loss of any form of natural theology, Christologically formulated. Blond, contra the post-Ockham worldview, denies the existence of a secular realm as such apart from God. His conclusion—“this means that for me it is worldly form as God-given (as culminated and expressed in the union of word and flesh in Christ) that is revelatory, and nothing else” (235). Milbank makes a similar claim in his essay on “Knowledge,” that a natural theology, again oriented towards a Christology, is the key to re-uniting revelation and nature. “We have a sense of the corporeal depth of things only because we take the surface of things as signs disclosing or promising such depth” (27). Analogically, ontology is no longer divorced from theology in a separate philosophical realm, but is itself the source of revelation. This is a common assumption for many of the essays, and important, because it is upon this basis that all the writers feel justified in destabilizing the secular and centralizing the sacral. This reappraisal of the theological tradition, and the assertion of an alternative comprehensive narrative, often provides the context for an enjoyable and fascinating recovery of “lost” theological figures, like John Georg Hamann, Franz Heinrich Jacobi, and Francisco Suárez SJ, or the re-appraisal of such eminent theologians and philosophers as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Anselm.

For example, Conor Cunningham in his essay, “Language: Wittgenstein after Theology,” spends as much time distinguishing the early and late philosophy(ies) of Witt-
Wittgenstein as he does forwarding his thesis that philosophical explanation performs the fall over again. His evaluation of Wittgenstein’s thought and its import for theology is light and fecund. Philosophy, in succumbing to the sway of thirteenth-century voluntarist conceptions of God, which established the possibility of examining the world as a given apart from God, became a kind of discourse, a peculiar language, without a ground. The result was a non-participatory philosophy, an ontic grammar that had lost its “is” because it is only as it participates in God. He traces this fall briefly through Descartes, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. The death knell for this language that had lost its basis for speaking was rung by Wittgenstein. The immanent, in its separation into immanence, needs to transcend itself in order to establish a transcendence, but this doubling is, as it were, groundless. Wittgenstein himself, although pointing to the escape route, is unable to cross over himself; and instead suggests a “wordless religion,” because “if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost” (86). Clearly, this is the final resting place for a philosophy based on a language divorced from its transcendent source. As Cunningham concludes, “only a grounding in a transcendent source which expresses itself in specific language saves the ultimacy of language. Only for theology, not philosophy, is grammar the last word” (86).

The format for the book and the list of contributors is somewhat unique. The acknowledgments emphasize that seven of the contributors are Anglicans of a “High Church” persuasion, and the remainder are Roman Catholic. It also emphasizes that this is a Cambridge collection. Eight of the authors are students or faculty at Cambridge, and the remainder are either graduates of or influenced by the same. The essays are arranged into broad topical units, all seeking to “re-envision particular cultural spheres from a theological perspective which they all regard as the only non-nihilistic perspective, and the only perspective able to uphold even finite reality” (4). The first four address broad conceptual categories, each subitled to signify the primary theological conversation partner. John Milbank on “Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” narrates how these two theologians offered, within their own theological tradition, a sustained and cogent critique of (nihilistic) enlightenment philosophy, and therefore contribute to radical orthodoxy by outwitting nihilism and sublating philosophy within a radicalized theology. John Montag SJ on “Revelation: The False Legacy of Suárez,” is more focused on the subtitle than the title, performing the work of analysis and recovery, even going into extensive historical and critical detail regarding the works of Suárez, and only secondarily discussing the topic (this is characteristic, by the way, of a number of the essays). The essay is in fact a defense of Aquinas as a rival to modern theological accounts, and an appraisal of Suárez within the Aquinian purview. His conclusion parallels Milbank’s, for where Milbank contends that knowledge involves “revelation of the infinite in the finite,” Montag argues that revelation is an “intensification of human understanding” (5). With the same radicalizing tendency, Conor Cunningham on “Language: Wittgenstein after Theology” concludes that either Wittgenstein’s linguistic turn is, contrary to Wittgenstein’s own contention, simply a post-Kantian philosophy, or a philosophical project that begs a theological conclusion. Finally, Laurence Paul Hemming on “Nihilism: Heidegger and the Grounds of Redemption” is a particularly fascinating postmodern Christian “recovery” of Heidegger, with keen reflections on nihilism.

The second grouping concerns itself with human practices, with Michael Hanby writing on “Desire: Augustine beyond Western Subjectivity,” and David Moss on “Friendship: St. Anselm, Theoria and the Convolution of Sense.” Hanby identifies Augustine’s famous aporias as themselves, analogically and iconically, images of the Trinity; what is “absent” in Augustine (as
recognized in the ninth book of his *Confessions* is (ful)filled by that which becomes “present” in him. Through an appeal to Plato’s recollection of forms, Hanby interprets Augustine as making a profoundly postmodern turn, turning interiority into exteriority, the self as given from outside rather than developed from within. Augustine has “turned the self inside out and defined interiority in terms of an exteriority which is imparted entirely as gift” (114). Moss continues this aligning of the Fathers with postmodern discourse, rubbing Anselm’s writings on friendship with the shoulders of the concepts of otherness and “alterity.” He ontologizes friendship, comparing it to Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am” and Heidegger’s “Here I am,” and states that Anselm’s parallel ontological assertion can be summed up in the statement, “We are friends.” A unique and intriguing thesis.

The third section attempts to deal more concretely with sexuality, bodies, and politics. Gerald Loughlin on “Erotics: God’s sex” is especially provocative (we might say titillating) as it seeks to explore sexual difference and relation within the Trinity, and indeed between Christ, Mary, and church. Loughlin takes Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological dramatic theory seriously, and attempts to dramatize the erotic and agapeic elements of the divine drama. Graham Ward deals with “Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ,” and he dramatizes as well, taking us selectively through disruptive, aporetic moments in the life of Christ—the transfiguration, the last supper, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension—and shows how it is exactly through the disruptions, absences, and aporias present in these Christic moments that grace is conferred. In being destabilized and displaced, the body of Christ can indeed become the church as the erotic(!) and eucharistic community. Continuing these thoughts on eucharistic community, William T. Cavanaugh writes on “The City: Beyond Secular Parodies.” He rejects the soteriological claims of the modern nation states, the secular state being a “crude parody of the body of Christ” (14). In its stead, Cavanaugh proposes a “Christian anarchism.” Contrary to what he deems to be popular opinion, that religion is a primary source of violence, and the modern state a peace-establishing force, Cavanaugh believes the only model for a true peace (a peace not dependent on the maintenance and tolerance of national boundaries) is the body of Christ, portrayed most vividly in our assimilation into Christ and our assimilation of Christ in Communion.

The final three essays speak of the realm of aesthetics: Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt on “Aesthetics: The Theological Sublime,” Philip Blond on “Perception: From Modern Painting to the Vision in Christ,” and Catherine Pickstock on “Music: Soul, City and Cosmos after Augustine.” Bauerschmidt, relying once again on Balthasar, places the aesthetic at the center of theology. Blond appropriates Milbank’s concept of depth, and argues that it is not modern art, but the modern secular understanding of art, that fails to see depth in visible things, to apprehend the invisible in the visible. Pickstock carries this thought forward and connects these aesthetic concerns to the cosmological, in a musical key. To harmonize these connections between aesthetics, theology, and cosmology is to set us listening to the “cosmic music,” and as the editor’s introduction concludes, to reestablish “a cosmos, a psyche, a polis...” (20).

Some caveats. Generally, the rhetoric of the Cambridge School (dubbed Milbank & Co. in the February 2000 issue of First Things) is overdone and sometimes verges on hyperbole. Reading the introduction, one could conclude that the editors believe that “finite reality” itself is dependent on the radical orthodox critique of secular nihilism. This strong rhetorical turn may be due in part to the Platonic tendencies of the work, most notable in all the writers’ desire for a “clean” orthodoxy, an orthodoxy that, although addressing many realms of human experience, is still most clearly focused on gnosis, reason, theory. And though
practices” are supposedly central to the radical orthodox project, it is hard to imagine what concrete and messy church or community with which they would align themselves. There are many points in the essays where theological innovation is forwarded as “redemptive” and this leads, ultimately, to the greatest weakness of the work. Words like radical and new in relation to theological constructs tend to obscure the center of orthodoxy, which is the redemptive power of Christ, not of theological innovation.

Conversely and positively, anyone interested in reading an innovative “school” of theology, one that makes radical claims about the relation between orthodox thought and modern secularism, will find the compilation invigorating. The specialized interests of the essayists bring the reader into contact with a host of new concepts and thinkers. A survey of the necessarily perfunctory summaries present in this review attest to that. Furthermore, Radical Orthodoxy does accomplish one of its primary goals, to be mediating without being accommodating. To bring the sacraments, patristic theology, and Trinitarian discourse squarely and critically into the postmodern cultural and literary conversation on language, meaning, and being is an exciting and worthy pursuit.

The larger question posed by the emergence of this book, and in fact posed by Milbank himself, is, “Has there ever been a truly post-liberal theology?” Certainly, this work begs the question, and for all its orthodox rhetoric, it contains many traces of thorough-going liberalism. Milbank’s heated and lengthy footnote on Barth sounds more than passingly similar to Tillich’s emphasis on the Ground of Being, and John Montag’s revelation defined as the intensification of human understanding, or special illumination of the intellect, carries the Romantic mark of Schleiermacher’s intuition for the ultimate. As Barth well knew, the naturalizing of revelation fit Schleiermacher’s thought quite well; as readers of Barth know well, neo-orthodox movements, for all their exaggerated breaks with theological liberalism, still adopt many of its basic assumptions. In spite of the hopes of radical orthodoxy, apparently the answer to Milbank’s question is still, “Not yet!”

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Andrew Kirk’s concise overview of contemporary mission theology is, in his own words, “an attempt to present the crucial material on theology of mission in a convenient form...intended to guide the student through some of the relevant discussion on a fairly wide range of issues” (1). Kirk, who is dean of the School of Mission and World Christianity at Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England, admits that he covers much of the same ground as David Bosch’s magisterial and ground-breaking Transforming Mission (American Society of Missiology, 1991). However, instead of providing a comprehensive account of developments in both the ecumenical and evangelical mission camps, as Bosch does, he restricts himself to a discussion of mission from the ecumenical perspective. The failure to engage the evangelical view is the major flaw in what is otherwise a highly readable and useful introduction to current missiology.

This book is divided into three unequal parts. The first is entitled, “Laying Foundations,” and is devoted to reflection on the nature of theology as being essentially missiological: “there can be no theology without mission…no theology which is not missionary” (11). Kirk defines mission in the broadest possible way as “what the Christian community is sent to do” (24), and regards mission theology as “a means of validating, correcting and establishing on better foundations the motives and actions
of those wanting to be part of the answer to the prayer, “Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven” (21).

The missionary nature of the church is intimately connected with our understanding of God as Trinity, Kirk maintains, and with our grasp of Jesus’ own mission. Kirk is clearly influenced by the 1989 gathering in San Antonio of the WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism when he speaks of the need to do “mission in Christ’s way.” Like Jesus, then, the church is committed to witnessing to the kingdom of God by restoring wholeness to human life, promoting justice in human society and creating grass roots efforts to oppose the “destructive spiral” of violence prevalent in our world.

Kirk examines these three commitments in the seven chapters that comprise Part II. Each chapter in this section deals with a significant issue in contemporary mission thought, including evangelism, inculturation, justice, and interreligious dialogue. The most successful of these chapters concerns the “Encounter with Religions of the World,” in which he argues that the often-used categories of “exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism” should be replaced by the less emotional and ambiguous terms, “particularity, generality and universality.” Such a move, Kirk contends, would eliminate a wide range of negative connotations that distort the current discussion. He ends this chapter by noting that however formidable conversations with other religious believers may be, they are not as difficult as the inter-Christian dialogues that will emerge from the growing cultural diversity of the Christian church in today’s world.

In addition to these common missiological themes, Kirk touches on topics not often raised in mission circles, such as nonviolence and eco-justice. While these discussions are engaging, he appears more interested in asserting the importance of these themes for the modern world than in establishing a sound theological and biblical basis for them. The final chapter in this section on “partnership” is sketchy and curiously dated, for it does not take into account the vast demographic shifts that have occurred in world Christianity over the last few decades.

The third section briefly examines what shape the church might assume if it took seriously its missionary nature. Kirk argues that such a church would have an identity clearly distinct from the world, yet would be intimately engaged in the world’s secular and political life. To the question asked in his title, “What is mission?” Kirk provides a succinct answer: “Mission is traveling. It is being on a journey. It is a restless moving towards the time when God will be all in all in creation and salvation” (232). This idea of mission as a pilgrimage, in his view, includes announcing the good news in culturally authentic ways; struggling to right the wrongs caused by economic malfunction, environmental degradation, and conflict; engaging with people of different beliefs; establishing new communities of disciples; and seeking the unity of Christians and human communities (233-234).

This book provides a clear and challenging perspective for all those who wish to think deeply about the mission of the church. It is suitable for both seasoned missiologists and students, and could be profitably used as a class textbook at the college or seminary level. Although less scholarly and innovative than Bosch, Kirk’s work is nevertheless more accessible and his achievement equally noteworthy.

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THE PRODIGAL HUGGING CHURCH:
A SCANDALOUS APPROACH TO MISSION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY,

Instead of exploring the question of how a church can have a positive influence on the culture that we live in, Tim Wright, the
executive pastor of the Community Church of Joy (ELCA) in Glendale, Arizona, asks how we allow culture to impact the mission of our church. Having served in the same congregation for almost two decades, he comes to the conclusion that the relationship between church and culture is one of the major causes of internal conflicts in churches. In other words, God’s people have different visions, convictions, and missions in terms of determining “the extent to which outside culture should dictate the mission of the church and how close to culture the church ought to get” (11). Does this sound scandalously familiar?!

For Christians, there is always the creative dynamic between living in the culture and yet staying true to the values of the Christian life. We live in the world, but are not of the world! Using the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) as an illustration, Wright’s interpretation is that God goes into culture and hugs prodigals so as to transform them. He then suggests that Jesus calls us as his church to develop a similar attitude—to reach out to culture with that same kind of loving, reckless abandon; to risk scandal by immersing ourselves in culture and hugging prodigals, that the people of culture might be transformed (17). In contrast, our usual strategy is inviting people into our midst with the expectation that they will conform to our standard church tradition, culture, and language.

Developing a perspective and systematizing this scandalous approach to mission, Wright expounds, along with case examples, the following seven characteristics of a Prodigal Hugging Church:

1. **Embracing Culture**—The Word became a human being and lived here with us (John 1:14 CEV). The kingdom of God is radically different from culture. But the ruler of that kingdom became radically like culture in order to embrace it (20).

2. **Welcoming Culture**—To welcome means to receive gladly someone’s presence or companionship (21). Are we willing to “get our hands dirty” with scandalous people? (22).

3. **Celebrating Culture**—Are we willing to find the good in culture, or will we isolate ourselves from the world (25)? Hanging with the community and being a presence of light, our church needs to learn how to celebrate culture in order to show culture the love of Christ (26).

4. **Affirming Culture**—God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them (John 3:17 CEV). Prodigal Hugging Churches use warmth rather than force, affirmation rather than condemnation (28). God uses goodness to draw us to a new way of living. God always makes the first move by reaching out to us with grace, by leading with kindness (29).

5. **Engaging Culture**—To engage means to attract and hold by influence and power, to induce to participate (30). Rather than isolating from or ignoring culture, Prodigal Hugging Churches look for ways to use familiar cultural icons, images, and symbols to move people to Christ (33).

6. **Using Culture**—Prodigal Hugging Churches aren’t afraid to rub shoulders with culture in order to learn from it and then use that learning to try to impact culture with the love of Christ. Prodigal Hugging Churches listen to and use culture to help redeem culture (38).

7. **Serving Culture**—God conformed himself to culture in order to reach it. In the person of Jesus, God laid aside his own rights and privileges and became like a slave. Prodigal Hugging Churches exist to serve culture in the name of Jesus (39).

We Christians habitually enjoy the company of the same compatible groups of people and also are religiously accustomed to the familiar liturgies in the services every Sunday morning. Strange, secular, odd, weird people coming from outside to join us will make us uneasy. The idea of changing us and our congregational traditions and structures to accommodate to the cultural needs of the outsiders so that they feel welcome and comfortable in our church is totally beyond our imagination and abso-
lutely scandalous. But this is exactly what Wright writes about in the book.

Suggesting a scandalous way to participate in God’s mission in the postmodern, postchristian culture, Wright reminds us to reach out into the community as Prodigal Hugging Churches. Therefore, it is revolutionary to reconstruct, restructure, reinvent, redevelop, and recreate our churches to be hospitable to the unchurched, the non-churched, the outsiders, and the prodigals so that they will be drawn to us. To realize this, we will willingly and willfully transform ourselves into welcoming, culture-friendly, and Prodigal Hugging Churches.

In this short but provocative and challenging book, Wright dynamically advocates for the Prodigal Hugging Churches. However, some concerns and questions regarding his scandalous approach to mission remain unclear and need to be addressed. They are as follows: (1) Wouldn’t there be a danger of compromising or even losing our Christian identity and relevance during and after the process of deliberate culture-friendly transformation? (2) How do we maintain the creative tension and sustain the balance of living in the world, but not being of the world within the context of a corporate Christian life? (3) How and when do we determine which expressions or segments of the culture would be celebrated in our church? (4) Who will set the guidelines and make the final decisions on which parts of the culture should be accepted and adapted and which ignored and rejected?

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A sequel to Politics, Religion, and the Common Good and again part of the Public Religion Project funded by the Pew Charitable Trust hosted by the University of Chicago, this is another book which seeks “to promote efforts to bring to light and interpret the forces of faith within a pluralistic society” (155). Like its predecessor, it surveys the landscape with compassionate fairness and organizes a conversation the reader is invited to join. Also like its predecessor, no single religious perspective is encouraged to take up an educationally imperialistic posture. The thesis rather is this: that “religion is too widespread and too deep a phenomenon not to be reckoned with” (139) across the educational spectrum. That does not suggest it should get “public relations favor,” for its positive and negative sides both are “up for examination” (139). Marty sets out to unite the common concerns of private and public elementary, secondary, and higher education around the single issue of religion (2-3). He wants to avoid compartmentalization, to resist dealing with education on one level or another or one faith community or another, and instead to integrate religion and education in general ways. In the process he addresses three groups of people, those “who despise outcroppings of spirituality and religion,” those “who believe there can be a potentially healthy relationship between religion and education,” and those “most interested in private and parochial schooling” (3-4).

The first chapter defines terms: the common good, education, religion, and conversation. The first refers to the good of the “larger public,” and the second essentially means “schooling.” The third is more com-
plicated. Marty defines religion as having characteristics of ultimate concern, community, myth and symbol, rite and ceremony, and behavioral correlates. Then, in a typically Martyesque way, models for dialogue are suggested by comparing argument and conversation. A carefully nuanced argument for conversation yields the necessity and place for argument, but wants to make an equally compelling place for conversing about right questions. The second chapter makes the case for the urgency of the conversation, pointing out that at virtually every educational issue in our culture religion is involved, and that we delude ourselves and set snares if we avoid it.

Though not the book’s thesis, the historical map is one of the most valuable chapters. In six and a half pages it moves from the majority Protestant faith of the early American republic, back to the theocracy of ancient Israel and Christendom, then through the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century revolutions, the nineteenth-century “second establishment” in the United States, Jeffersonian reason versus revivalists, Will Herberg’s threefold model of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew in place of the old Protestant establishment, and the shift to pluralism and multi-culturalism.

The remainder of the book gets at the topic in more detail, working from elementary to higher education and public to private to home schooling, isolating fears, asking about training of teachers, and raising moral dilemmas and church/state issues. To make his point with an example, Marty cites a meeting with a university board. On his way to the meeting he “red-penciled [his] way through the New York Times” and found eighteen stories where “religion was an explicit theme” (112-113). How does one judge a Buddhist monk who immolated himself before the United Nations without knowing “what Buddhism or a Buddhist monk actually is?” he asks (114). He then raises a series of broader questions, among them this one: “Can American life really be understood without religion?” (117). Making the point that the United States is a “public” with a series of “intersecting ‘subpublics’” (133), he argues that we cannot not reckon with religion “in primary or at least secondary schools and thereafter, no matter what the aegis or auspices” (139). So, he says, start talking.

This is not a book that will make any particular religious group happy, because the agenda of no single group is pushed. The value of various religious perspectives and their study for the common good may, however, make some schools uneasy. Those who have sold their particular religious birthright for a general educational posture that avoids the religious issues for which they have the expertise may wonder if they have done themselves or the country any favor.

As I said in the review of Politics, Religion, and the Common Good, footnotes are appropriately terse for a text of this sort. Unfortunately, they appear in four pages of “Notes” at the end of the book rather than on the pages to which they apply. The clean look publishers seem to prefer makes ease of their use awkward. Ease of use for the book as a whole is assisted, on the other hand, by seven helpful, annotated pages of “Resources.”

As for Politics, Religion, and the Common Good, the writing is lively yet serious, carefully researched yet not technical, and accessible to any reasonably well-informed citizen. It will not give a reader neatly packaged answers, but it will stimulate a refreshing conversation and action about education, religion, and the common good.

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It has often been said—to the point of cliché—that people don’t know much about art, but they know what they like. Readers of A Journey in Christian Art will go
a long way toward remedying the first part of that cliche, and maybe even the second as well. As a companion volume to the earlier *The Story of Christian Music* by Andrew Wilson-Dickson (Fortress Press), the present volume is neither art history nor art criticism. Rather, it is a *tour* of western art, somewhat akin to the popular commentaries of Sister Wendy Beckett.

Helen de Borchgrave’s book begins with early Christian catacomb art from the fourth century, and proceeds chronologically to the present day, concluding with the compelling images of Roger Wagner and Craige Aitchison. Over one hundred color photographs illustrate this nearly 2000-year tour. Some of the reproductions, being smaller than the paintings themselves, appear crowded; and when the author discusses the work, certain details prove elusive. Keeping a magnifying glass at hand helps in this regard. The sharply focused photos hold up well under magnification.

One of the great strengths of the book is the frequent and informative juxtaposition of text and illustration. The text accompanying Matthias Grünewald’s *The Crucifixion* is especially compelling. “It is horrific. Christ’s body is torn and lacerated, every nerve taut as it is stretched on the wood. Even the wood is strained and bends under its appalling weight—for Christ is carrying the sins of the whole world” (96). This excerpt from a much longer discussion indicates how provocative de Borchgrave’s narrative can be. She helps the reader to see: Seeing, we come to appreciate the work; appreciated, the work can become an aid to meditation about Christ’s death on the cross for us and for the world.

People who have been hesitant to look at art intently or who consider art only as decoration are invited into a deeper understanding of western Christian art. Throughout the book de Borchgrave suggests many ways in which art is more than decorative canvas on a wall. In discussing Giovanni Bellini’s *Pieta*, for example, she notes that “(t)hese pictures helped the Christian empathize with Christ the martyr, the innocent victim; to look at Christ’s pain can also help to ease our own” (62). Relating art to contemporary concerns, de Borchgrave discusses Hans Memling’s fifteenth-century painting *The Last Judgment* this way: “When martial law was imposed on the Polish people after Solidarity was crushed in 1981, life was very hard and fear lurked round every corner. Paintings like *The Last Judgment* fed the soul like manna in the desert...Mercy, justice, and truth—how easily values are blurred by comfortable materialism” (80-81).

Although many of the author’s comments are helpful aids to personal reflection and even group discussion, some of them press beyond commentary into the area of preachy interpretation. Her discussion of Caspar David Friedrich’s *Winter Landscape* (169) tends to read more into the figure leaning against a rock than the visual evidence alone would support. Moreover, some of her other assertions are such that one would welcome a chance to enter into further conversation. Are Byzantine objects cold and lifeless as the author asserts (28)? Is Simone Martini’s *Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Asano* really the definitive painting on this theme (39)? Anyone who has spent time before Robert Campin’s *Annunciation* at the Cloisters in New York City might wish to argue otherwise.

There are other demurs that one is obliged to make as well. Frequently the author will discuss a painting, thus whetting the reader’s visual appetite. But the painting is not illustrated, therefore leading to a degree of optical hunger. Further, the book is heavily male-oriented (there being only one woman artist mentioned) and Eurocentric. All of the paintings included in this book (there are fewer than five sculptures discussed) reside in European museums. American readers, supposedly the intended audience of this book, will have a difficult time testing out the opinions and interpretations of the author. It would have been felicitous if some of the fine examples of Christian art in North American museums had been included. While the book help-
fully highlights German and Polish art, no American artists (with the possible exception of the expatriate John Singer Sargent) are included. Yet such artists as Benjamin West, Thomas Eakins, and Barnett Newman, even Warner Sallman—to name just a few American painters—have produced compelling examples of religious art.

For all of these perceived shortcomings, however, this is a splendid book. De Borchgrave decidedly takes the reader on a grand tour, a journey into Christian art. Like many first-rate tour guides, she shows us the sites, illustrating them with fine pictures and robust narrative. She offers helpful insights into the Christian vision and gives moving interpretation to what artists have painted on canvas. Her descriptions can be poetic, as with Pieter Bruegel’s *Census at Bethlehem*: “It is very cold. Snow lies on the ground and the lakes are frozen. An evening light bathes the Brabant village as the sun sets; people shuffle home at the end of a day’s labour while children play....In the centre of the picture, partly eclipsed by a clump of wheeled barrels, Joseph leads the donkey on which Mary sits, accompanied by an ox, the symbolic attribute of St Luke” (147). The tour guide truly invites the viewer to see the uncommon incarnation in the midst of common life, something preachers might well emulate in practicing their craft.

The author begins each chapter with quotes from a variety of writers like Catherine of Siena and Wilfred Owen; woven into the narrative are extensive quotations from a great number of spiritual writers. Such interweaving of text and illustration adds an imaginative dimension to this grand tour of Christian art. On occasion de Borchgrave makes penetrating comparisons between works of art. When she discusses John Singer Sargent’s World War I painting *Gassed* and refers to Bruegel’s *Parable of the Blind*, she makes a thoughtful point. Likewise, her discussions of crucifixions by Graham Sutherland, Grünewald, and Cimabue give insight into the theology of the cross. These images—created in the twentieth, sixteenth, and thirteenth centuries respectively—also provide powerful commentary on suffering.

*A Journey into Christian Art* should appeal to readers who would like to deepen their appreciation of the wealth of religious art over the past twenty centuries—to know what they like and like what they know. On the whole, de Borchgrave proves to be an opinionated but reliable tour guide for anyone who might wish to join her on the journey. Along the way readers will not only view great and inspiring art, they will also gain valuable insights into Christian faith through the ages. “We glimpse, through the work of artists of faith, reflections of the spiritual and cultural climate of their day....Yet, whether experiencing persecution or spiritual revival, war or peace, political repression or freedom, they have all been inspired by the person and message of Christ and his church to make visible the invisible in mosaic, paint and stone; to enrich the mind, touch the heart, and feed the soul” (7-8). To join de Borchgrave in her journey into Christian art is nothing less than taking a journey into faith.

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