

# Reviews



**GREAT PRAYERS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**, by Walter Brueggemann. Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2008. Pp. vii+142. \$16.95 (paper).

Brueggemann's newly published volume is a vigorous appeal to people of faith who have "inhaled deeply of modern rationality" (136), and, as a result, now settle for an anemic prayer life that is "restrained by the rational limits of modernity" (xix). According to Brueggemann, prayer in such an environment is reduced to either a "psychological transaction" (xvii) or an "emotional exercise" (xix), both of which have no anchoring in a God who is larger than the supplicant.

Israel's prayers, alternatively, assume that "human life can impinge upon this 'other God' and recruit God into the life of the world" (xxvii). In Brueggemann's terms, "Prayer impacts the Lord of the promise" (46). Such prayers, which Brueggemann sees primarily within a "juridical frame of reference" (xxvii), reach toward the transformation of a world whose problems require the resources of one who transcends the problems themselves. According to Brueggemann, prayer of this kind must be recovered for three reasons. Firstly, "such prayer serves in vigorous ways to counter the idolatry all around us that assumes human ultimacy that ends either in pride or in despair" (xxvii). Prayer, in his thinking, creates a "zone of freedom" (xxvii) that is accessible to all and that resists the dominant culture's tendency toward control. Secondly, prayer as an act of dependence militates against "Western arrogance" (xxviii), which expresses itself in attitudes of self-sufficiency. Thirdly, prayer "serves

to counter the enormous temptation to monologue that causes a nullification of the human spirit" (xxviii). This dialogical reality in prayer does not permit for a final settlement (absolutism) but remains open to the new, the novel, and the inconvenient.

As to the book's organization, Brueggemann examines twelve prayers (Gen 18:22–33; Num 14:13–23; 1 Sam 2:1–10; 2 Sam 7:18–29; 1 Kings 3:5–15; Jon 2:2–9; Jer 32:16–25; 2 Kings 19:15–19; Ezra 9:6–15; Neh 1:4–11; Dan 9:3–19; Job 42:1–6), all of which are embedded within biblical narratives. The presence of these prayers within narratives suggests to Brueggemann that "Israel cannot tell its story without reference to prayer" (xix). In each chapter, therefore, he provides an exegetical survey of the prayer, and concludes with questions meant to provoke reflection and discussion.

Several chapters commend themselves as particularly helpful for the life of the church. Chapter 8 addresses Hezekiah's standoff with Sennacherib, an Assyrian king who "imagines he is free in his enormous power to do what he wants without reference to the ultimate governance of Yhwh" (84). According to Brueggemann, since Hezekiah's prayer is uttered from within the mess of state politics, it carries the potential to be both powerful and dangerous. Positively, Hezekiah's prayer suggests that prayer for a transformed world need not be "confined to safe familial or domestic spheres of life" (87). Negatively, the "seduction of this text is that temptation to harness 'the power of prayer' to the cause of state in uncritical ways" (87). Yhwh is present in the political realm, but Yhwh's presence is elusive and inscrutable

(86). This elusiveness provides the “ground for possibility in a world where empires always work to foreclose possibility” (87). The discussion is helpful, especially at a time when political discourse is too often clothed in metaphysical language.

Job’s prayer in Job 42:1–6 is particularly poignant. Job is an anomaly for those who grew up with the “omni” God of Western theology, because Job is one who “refuses all the pious conventionalities and will speak from the core of his hurt and from his deep, unrestrained sense of not being taken seriously” (122). Job demands a day in court with God so that Job may defend himself “*within the usual system of reward and punishment*” (123, author’s emphasis). God’s answer, however, is just as unconventional. God will not participate in Job’s trial, and instead offers Job an image of divine sovereignty that leaves Job with a sense of wonder and amazement. Brueggemann’s most helpful insight, however, is his interpretation of Job’s enigmatic response in 42:6. Far from despising “himself” (the pronoun is absent in Hebrew), it may be more appropriate to say that Job rejects his (and *his friends!*) small thinking about creation; instead, Job “considers himself to be not unlike the Behemoth of 40:15, willed by God for boldness, fierceness, and freedom, anything but docile submissiveness” (128). In Brueggemann’s understanding, then, Job’s response in 42:6 is one of “self-assertion” (128) that defies both divine dismissiveness and self-abnegation. God “prefers a ‘prayer partner’ who is like Behemoth. . . strong, ferocious, and free in daring ways” (130). This suggestion, while based on a notoriously ambiguous text, is helpful in the modern church where prayer is too often domesticated by false conceptions of piety.

Much of the exegesis in this volume is not novel, and is available in other scholarly works dealing with OT prayers. What is novel and helpful about this book, however, is Brueggemann’s ability to marshal these OT prayers in

support of his sharp polemic against modes of “Western theology” that produce a church that is “cowardly and anemic, daring to pray only for that which rational philosophy regards as possible” (77). This highly accessible book could very easily be transformed into a weekly Bible study (each chapter is around ten pages) or even a sermon series. Additionally, for those interested in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, Brueggemann’s interaction with Jewish scholarship (most notably, the work of Moshe Greenberg) makes this volume an ideal catalyst for ecumenical discussion.

Michael Chan  
Emory University  
Atlanta, Georgia

**UNLOCKING ROMANS: RESURRECTION AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF GOD**, by J. R. Daniel Kirk. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. Pp. 245 + xiv. \$32.00 (paper).

Although Paul’s Letter to the Romans is considered one of the most important documents ever produced in human history, and certainly so within the Christian church, it continues to mystify its interpreters. Interpreters disagree widely concerning its purpose and its theology, and there is no end to suggestions.

The work of Daniel Kirk is one more attempt at taking a fresh look to see what is central to this important and challenging letter. Essentially he argues that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is “the most pervasive theme of the letter.” “In Romans,” he says, “the resurrection of Jesus becomes Paul’s key for demonstrating that the promises contained in the Scriptures have been fulfilled in the Christ event” (8). He contends that, in the face of Israel’s suffering in history, the question of theodicy looms large in this letter. Resurrection is God’s way of demonstrating his faithfulness to Israel, resulting in the salvation of Jews; moreover, Jesus’ lordship through resurrec-

tion makes salvation available to Gentiles as Gentiles.

After an introductory chapter that maps out the direction taken in the rest of the book, the author provides a survey on the function of resurrection in various texts (Old Testament, apocrypha, and pseudepigrapha). The primary function that he discerns is to address the question of theodicy. The people of Israel, in covenant with God and relying on God's promises, look to God for justice and salvation that would begin with the resurrection of the dead.

The chapters that follow, except for the very last, consist of a survey of key passages in Romans. In those eight chapters Kirk demonstrates the importance of resurrection in texts scattered throughout the letter (1:1–7; 4:13–25; 5:9–10; 5:12–8:11; 8:12–39; 10:6–13; 11:15; 13:8–14; 14:1–9; 15:12). The final chapter, “Reading with the Apostle” (206–234), consists of a theological engagement with the letter on the basis of the foregoing analyses and a discussion of the implications to be drawn for modern times, particularly in ethics, theodicy, and the unity of the church.

In a book that covers so much of Romans it is interesting to see how the author treats texts and themes on which interpreters continue to disagree. A few examples follow. At Romans 10:4, the Greek term *telos* is understood to be the “goal” (not the “end”) of the law (168). Concerning the section on “the weak and the strong” (14:1–15:13), it is assumed that Paul is taking up a live issue at Rome among Jewish and Gentile Christians (199–200), but a good number of interpreters consider the treatment of the topic more illustrative of conduct among believers than an exhortation about an actual problem. Considerable attention is given to 11:26 (“so all Israel will be saved”), and the author claims that Paul's hope for Israel's future is reinterpreted in light of the resurrected Christ, and God will bring Israel out of death to life (188–193), but the reader is left wondering whether Israel's salvation will be established by its coming to faith in Christ or by the faith-

fulness of God without such faith (a *Sonderweg* or “special way,” as it is called in the literature). Concerning the *pistis Christou* debate (relevant for interpreting 3:22 and 3:26), Kirk sides with those who claim that Paul speaks of the “faithfulness of Christ,” not the “faith in Christ” (the believer's faith), as that which makes justification possible (48, 59, 222). Justification itself “is not the principal theme” of the letter (10), and Paul places it “within the larger category of participation in Christ”; it is but “one facet of union with Christ” (223–224). But then one has to ask whether anything significant of the theology of Paul remains standing if justification by faith is removed from it.

What remains a puzzle is that the author does not deal with the purpose of Romans. At one point (162) the phrase “the purpose of Romans” appears in connection with a study of Romans 10:6–13. Yet the most that one can derive from that part of the book is that Paul wrote Romans to explicate its thematic center, i.e., the resurrection of Jesus and the salvation that is made possible by it for both Jew and Gentile. But the question arises why Paul would write and send this letter, his longest and most carefully constructed, to the community of believers at Rome, a community that he had not founded or visited previously.

The book is engaging and can serve the reader as a survey of major portions of Paul's letter. By all means, the theme of resurrection is in Romans, and this book helps one to see its importance. But going back to the book's title, does the discussion truly “unlock” Romans (assuming that it is somehow locked up)? Does it set the letter free for a new understanding of it? Probably no one angle of vision will do that to the satisfaction of those who work on Romans with great care. But the book can be recommended for the serious reader looking for a fresh treatment of Romans that takes a theme, runs with it, and brings it to the fore like no other book currently does. Moreover, at a time when so many approaches to Romans eschew

a theological treatment of it in favor of analyzing its rhetoric or social world, important though they are, it is refreshing to read a work in which Romans is taken seriously for its theological significance.

Arland J. Hultgren  
Luther Seminary  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

**WITNESS TO DISPOSSESSION: THE VOCATION OF A POSTMODERN THEOLOGIAN**, by Tom Beaudoin. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008. Pp. 225. \$24.00 (paper).

Catholic practical theologian and educator Tom Beaudoin will be well known to many readers because of his popular books on young adult faith (*Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*) and consumer culture (*Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are and What We Buy*). He is one of the most creative and relevant theologians of his generation, someone who constantly presses theology to serve as a critical resource for discipleship today.

While practical theologians, myself included, have much to gain from serious engagement with Beaudoin's work in this new volume, pastors have even more. Pastors are the frontline theologians of the church, and their work with communities is often a witness to dispossession, even if they do not yet have the language to describe it as such. How the practical theological work of the pastor and her community unfolds has much to do with how believable the witness is to an increasingly skeptical public. In this review, I aim first to characterize what Beaudoin means by his title, then summarize the main sections, and finally editorialize regarding how his work is relevant, even essential, for pastors and their congregations.

The title is not straightforward, but careful attention to it begins to help make sense of what Beaudoin is up to. It is a passive title, and yet not at all passive. To witness could be to

stand by and simply observe. Christians know, however, that to give witness is akin to testimony. It is a showing. What we witness to, Beaudoin argues, is dispossession, a taking away of what we have, a losing of what was our own. In such a witness we find ourselves with "empty hands" that "become Christian hands by how and what they give away" (144). Beaudoin shows that this witness is integral to the postmodern reality of our loss of surety, of the received truths and the rules of the ecclesiastical game. They are lost when we give up our protection of cherished memorials to faith's past and actually "undergo a genealogizing that is experimental, radical and necessary for 'credibility' today" (144). Such a witness stares honestly into the face of the church's complicity with violence and abuse. It seeks a means to faith through giving up what one *thought* was right for the sake of being open to what and where God is unexpectedly active in the world. Beaudoin finds a way forward drawing on Bonhoeffer, who in *Letters and Papers from Prison* proposes that Christians follow a "secret discipline" that sustains a "belonging wholly to the world" (145).

The chapters of the book amount to serial genealogical critique and witnessing to the dispossession thereby effected, while still seeking to find the "secret discipline" that sustains us day to day. Beaudoin draws his critical method of genealogical critique from French philosopher Michel Foucault, and this book is among the most fruitful theological engagements with Foucault that I've seen. The introduction outlines his struggle, as a Catholic theologian, to make sense of the church and its faith in the wake of the sex abuse scandal—a recent history Beaudoin characterizes with the striking and strong phrase "Catholic evil" (xiv).

His turn to Foucault, and especially the tool of genealogical critique, helps make what is admittedly a collection of essays cohere quite well. The first section consists of chapters on the challenge of teaching theology today, in the more traditional classroom setting and in the

give-and-take of daily life. The second section engages culture, including reflections on spirituality and pop culture. A third section takes up the identity and vocation of the theologian today, asking fundamental questions about what we think we're doing when we speak of God and the world. The last section opens up the question of faith and daily life, including a provocative dialog between Foucault and Bonhoeffer on the question of identity. The conclusion is a stocktaking: What sort of vocation does this kind of theologizing imply, and what are the contours of such a vocation as a refiguring of Catholic theology and, more broadly, theology in a postmodern context?

How is Beaudoin's work relevant for pastors and their congregations? In their "witness to dispossession," they embody Christ. Chapter 8, "The Struggle to Speak Truthfully," offers a way to see such a claim in action. Beaudoin begins by saying that we can name "any of the well-known grievances with the church, or some that are not yet well-enough known, and most of these are related to Catholicism's problems with truth and with frankness" (125). "For centuries," he says, drawing on Foucault directly, "religion could not bear having its history told" (125). Turning from this problem, he uses Foucault's investigations into the ancient Greek term *parrhesia*, which literally means "saying everything." It is often translated as speaking frankly, truthfully, or boldly. After highlighting the major characteristics of *parrhesia* and those *parrhesiastes* who embodied it, he details how the New Testament deploys the word both for Jesus and for his disciples. All this allows Beaudoin to then expose the way ecclesiastical power confines frank speech to the confessional, refusing its use in broader church life, and even in extreme cases using that containment of frank speech as a deplorable technique to silence victims of sexual abuse. While this example is from the Catholic context, it is a lesson for all pastors or leaders in positions of power in the church.

Read this book if you want to think hard

and critically about the Christian life today, the church, and especially theological and pastoral leadership. Don't let the centrality of Michel Foucault's philosophy keep you away. Tom Beaudoin, despite sometimes slipping into an imitation of the pretzel-like writing endemic to French social theory, manages to offer a substantive introduction to Foucault along with his rich and rewarding theological reflections.

Christian Scharen  
Luther Seminary  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

**JESUS, THE WORD, AND THE WAY OF THE CROSS: AN ENGAGEMENT WITH MUSLIMS, BUDDHISTS, AND OTHER PEOPLES OF FAITH,** by Mark W. Thomsen. Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2008. Pp. 180. \$16.00 (paper).

Recently much has been written on the centrality and theology of the cross, and on mission. Thomsen brings these two themes together dialectically, in a novel way, to place before us a wonderful and powerful theological and missiological book. His goal is to integrate "the mission and crucifixion of Jesus in order to enable his death to explore the meaning of his life and to allow his life to interpret the meaning of his death. It is hoped that this approach to Jesus and the cross will give new insights into the reality of our faith and the radicality of God's mission, particularly in our engagement with Muslims and Buddhists" (26).

Thomsen's concerns are thoroughly christological, focusing on the "Cosmic Crucified." He struggles with the full implications of this, especially with the particularity of this claim and its universal import. He never minimizes Jesus and the Christian message in terms of salvation. At the same time, he condemns the usual imperial and arrogant way we have gone about the missiological task without taking the context, culture, and religious commitments of others seriously. The particularity of Cruci-

fied Jesus provides sacramental value as well as the moral example and compass to live by. God in Jesus lived a servant's existence and so loved the world that he died for it. This must have implications for our lives and our mission: "the essence of God's love will never be other than God's love concretized in Jesus. One can and does trust that the whole of life and the universe are immersed in that love" (89). Thomsen argues that it is even more important to affirm Jesus as normative for our discipleship.

Thomsen creatively places another dialectic before us: the theology of the cross and the vulnerability of God. His missiology is thus founded on the love and sacrifice of God in Christ and his total vulnerability on the cross. The cross is an invitation to Christian vulnerability, humbleness, and self-giving, which are then contrasted with the usual practice in mission:

Christians as disciples are called to proclaim the gospel of this self-giving, vulnerable One...they are also called to follow this Jesus into the pain of human existence; to participate in the humble, self-giving vulnerable love of the mission of this Jesus who incarnates the coming of God's kingdom....In contrast to all forms of Christian arrogance, intolerance and imperialism, Jesus' disciples are called to be servants washing people's feet, "Christ-minded" persons molded by the Cosmic Crucified. (9)

Thomsen brings in the crucified God to make a significant contribution to the particularity and universality of this Christology and the missionary task, which here has the concrete focus of engagement with Muslims and Buddhists. Thomsen's thesis is that a "creative, transforming, costly, suffering love of God concretely identified in Jesus is the most authentic way to articulate the gospel among Muslim and Buddhist communities today" (9). For, "Jesus' vulnerable mission ending in a violent death is distinct from Muhammad.... The mission of Jesus crucified tended to mold a Christian vision (soon lost in a militant Chris-

tendom) of a vulnerable God and a non-violent coming of the reign of God" (9). Further, "Jesus as the Cosmic Crucified speaks powerfully and effectively of divine costly love—the willingness of God to share suffering and brokenness....Buddhists who live without trust in God...may find interesting this new and different vision" (9).

The book has eight chapters and two appendices. The first two chapters look at the theology of the cross and the kingdom of God and God's radical mission. The next two deal with the contemporary challenge of mission and discipleship, which are followed by three chapters dealing with the unique theological task of engaging Muslims and Buddhists and the issues of dialogue and witness. In his concluding chapter entitled "A Radical Call to a Radical Mission," Thomsen states, profoundly:

Jesus and the cross concretize the radical gift of God's Kingdom. At the heart of that gift is Jesus' embodiment of a creative, life-affirming and transforming vulnerable love which embraces not only the world but the universe....Most miraculously, God's ultimate gift of love is not God's irresistible omnipotence, but God's vulnerable movement of "pain-love" into our lives. Only love that is willing to share human suffering and bear with human faithlessness and rebellion is capable of sharing transforming grace and forgiveness with us. (129)

Of the two important appendices, the first covers the necessary linguistic and terminological changes we need to make to effectively approach Islam. The second addresses issues and models of religious pluralism and the models for understanding interfaith relationships.

Thomsen shows that religious pluralism often assumes that: *one*, God and God's revelations are universal; *two*, that the many revelations reveal who God is; and *three*, that all revelations are in some sense authentic, and that there is no normative revelation.

The bottom line for this position is that Jesus is one among many revelatory events. . . . God is universally present to the whole of creation and to the whole human family. . . . [However] Recognition of sin as human brokenness and rebellion will prevent us from idealistic naïveté that glosses over what is distorted in human lives, culture and religions. . . . The Christian rests in the trust there is no past or future revelation of God that will negate the hope in the Cosmic Crucified; namely, that at the heart of the universe is the God willing to share human existence, solidarity with pain and brokenness, and in concretized form as Jesus go through struggling, suffering, and death for humanity's sake. This will always be the heart of our Christian witness." (97–98)

To achieve this most difficult task Thomsen draws upon his long experience of mission, overseas and at home. He engages with a who's who of theology and missiology as dialogical partners to build his case. He articulates their respective positions to build his theological argument for the decisive significance of Jesus crucified as the Son of God and as God, for developing its universal implication and missiological vocation of the church. Thomsen highlights the particularity of Jesus for the sake of developing a universal, ontological, and teleological significance of his Christology and how it leads to a missiological vocation.

Charles Amjad-Ali  
Luther Seminary  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

**THE MISSION AND DEATH OF JESUS  
IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY**, by

A. H. Mathias Zahniser. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009. Pp. 268. \$35.00 (paper).

Zahniser has provided the Christian community with a well-researched and in-depth analysis of how the significance of Jesus plays in both Islam and Christianity. He attempts to make clear the contrasting approaches of Is-

lam and Christianity to the mission of Jesus without turning to stereotypes or dismissive statements. It is clear that the discussions between Muslims and Christians regarding Jesus center on his nature (divine/human or human/prophet), the nature of divine revelation (person-event or eternal scripture), and the nature of the religion that God's revelations support. Zahniser deals at some length with each of these issues, especially the internal coherence and revelation of the Scriptures in the two traditions.

Zahniser's contribution is tied to at least three goals. His first goal is to present Muslim and Christian understandings of the events surrounding Jesus' final days of ministry, centering on both the reliability and truth of the events in Jerusalem as claimed by the Gospels and the Quranic verses dealing with those events. He then turns to an analysis of the variety of modern Muslim understandings of the actuality and meaning of Jesus' sufferings and death.

His second stated goal (10) is an attempt to remove double standards in the approach to interreligious understanding between Muslims and Christians that can hamper fruitful discussions. He seeks to base communication upon convictions rather than dependence upon stereotypes. Each tradition is presented in its own terms, without applying outside standards in the evaluation of faith statements. In doing this he embraces both an acknowledgment of the convictions inherent in the Muslim and Christian interpretations and certain commonalities that emerge among the stark differences in the understanding of Jesus' role.

A third stated goal is to engage Muslims in the importance for Christians of the cross and God's concrete involvement in Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, in order to help Muslims "understand my faith, or to put it more biblically, to give an explanation of the inner conviction that provides hope for the

near and distant future (1 Peter 3:15)—exactly my purpose in this book” (248).

The material in this interesting book centers on several questions, among which are:

(1) Zahniser asks, “Can the Qur’an be read in a way that does not flatly contradict the Christian view of the end of Jesus’ mission?” Zahniser says, “I think it can” (13). In chapter two, he makes significant observations about various Muslim interpreters’ readings of the Qur’an that point to verses that seem both to affirm and to deny the crucifixion of Jesus. He argues that it is possible for Muslims to affirm the crucifixion of Jesus as coherent with the oneness and triumph of Allah over unbelievers, but this affirmation is made without any need for Muslims to posit the atoning work of Jesus that is witnessed to by the Gospels (31).

(2) He then asks: To what degree is it important to understand the continuing relevance of medieval Muslim interpreters (especially Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari [d. 923]) for grasping the modern Muslim’s understanding of the significance of Jesus’ ministry? While classical commentators tended to deny the death of Jesus by crucifixion, some modern Muslim reinterpretations have chosen to break with the old tradition and accept the suffering and possible death of Jesus by crucifixion, but still denying the atoning significance of that event (chapters 3, 4, and 5).

(3) One key question taken up by Zahniser is: Are there ancient Christian traditions that deny the crucifixion of Jesus, and/or its atoning value, as is claimed by some Muslim commentators (especially Muhammad al-Qasimi)? Zahniser can see no evidence of such a denial prior to the second-century Gnostics. Since many modern Muslim interpretations of the Jesus event utilize a certain Gospel of Barnabas as an ancient authority, Zahniser investigates the claims for that gospel’s ancient pedigree and finds them wanting.

(4) Can the New Testament and the Qur’an be fruitfully compared, or do they play differing roles in the two religions? Chapter eight

deals with this important point in Muslim/Christian discussions. Christians and Muslims both give a central importance to Scripture, but with quite different approaches to that centrality.

(5) Zahniser deals at length in chapters 9–13 with the question of the internal coherence of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ prediction and experience of his suffering, death, and resurrection. He argues for that coherence, and for the Christian understanding of its reliability within the context of first-century practices of oral transmission. He also deals with the question whether there is, for the Christian, any coherence in some modern Muslim interpretations of the Gospels that would accept the suffering of Jesus as properly “messianic” (by Muslim standards) but still maintain that he appealed to, and received, Allah’s mercy in freeing him from actual crucifixion.

This book would be a fine addition to the collection of any pastor or teacher who has a rudimentary knowledge of Islam, and whose ministry setting would bring that pastor into contact, conversation, or dialogue with Muslims. Zahniser will take the reader on a detailed journey of discovery into the role Jesus plays in Muslim and Christian traditions.

Steven A. Haggmark  
Luther Seminary  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

**A SECULAR AGE**, by Charles Taylor. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007. Pp. 896. \$39.95 (cloth).

Charles Taylor, the preeminent Canadian philosopher, has offered us a rich journey in his Templeton Prize-winning tome, *A Secular Age*. The book is a marvel, traversing huge periods of time and multiple philosophical and sociological theories to articulate how it is that we now find ourselves, in our time, in a secular age. At first glance, it may seem that Taylor is revisiting a thesis now assumed to be debunked. The sociological secularization theory

as propagated by the likes of the early Peter Berger has been all but dismissed. The idea that the more modern a society gets the more secular it becomes, until there is little to no reason for religion at all, has been washed from the firm commitments of social theorists by other perspectives like globalization theory. But Taylor is not necessarily taking the reader in this direction. Rather, Taylor seeks to explore how, philosophically and socially, we can live in a time where belief in God (of any kind) is optional. He asserts repeatedly that only five hundred years ago it was nearly impossible to exist as if there were no God. But now, it is not only possible but quite easy for us to do so.

*A Secular Age* is essentially the travelogue of this great transition in the last five hundred years. Therefore, Taylor teases out what he means by secularity. He explains that often (especially in the literature of secularization theorists) secularity is understood as either political, showing how institutions have evolved beyond, and therefore replaced, religious functions, or secularity is understood as social participation shifting away from religious attendance. Taylor is not interested in exploring either of these perspectives in any depth. It is not that they lack importance; rather, he thinks there is a more fundamental reality to secularity, little explored. Therefore, he offers us a third understanding of secularity, which he calls the conditions of belief. Taylor takes us on an 800-page journey, exploring how and why there has been a shift from belief in God being unchallenged to being greatly challenged. Or, to say it another way, how we have shifted from belief in the divine being nearly universal to its being only one possibility among others.

It is usually assumed that this shift has everything to do with science, that science dethrones religion. But Taylor is unconvinced. Rather, he seeks the reasons for secularity closer to the ground, in the average person's day-to-day living. Taylor places secularity's causes within the historical transitions of relig-

ion and society itself. Following Max Weber, Taylor explains that over five hundred years ago the world was an enchanted place. Gods, spirits, and demons were everywhere, the forests were haunted, and mystery was ubiquitous. Therefore, the self was a porous self, always open to multiple realities, unable to easily delineate boundaries between self and nonself. With this background, Taylor explains that everything changed with the Axial Revolution, where Christianity itself sought to separate the sacred from the profane, providing the very seeds for the disenchantment of the world that would lead to the secularity of belief that Taylor is exploring.

This moves the reader to what Taylor calls the Great Disembedding, which in Christianity meant the splitting of sacred and secular into two distinct categories. This would unravel the enchantment of the world. Now, so-called enchanted experiences only had credence in the sacred realm and were eliminated from the secular realm, disenchanting it. Taylor asserts that this division had significant impact on how one conceptualized the self. Now, the self and the world were no longer a whole, but were experienced in parts. Therefore, the porous self gave way to a buffered identity, the idea that you can think of yourself as outside of, or other than, the world. This buffered identity is the core ingredient for the poisonous stew of Western individualism that Taylor so opposes.

Therefore, to reiterate, it is not science *per se* that led to secularity, but the evolution of the understanding of the self; this actually had its origins in religion, rather than outside of it. The Reformation drove this buffered individualism deeper within society than anything else did. Reform-minded elites pushed the enchanted understanding of the world into disrepute, persuading society to instead see individuals objectively as seeking moral and personal improvement, early on connecting this with religious desires. But soon it became clear that one could seek such personal improvement without orthodox belief in God.

This moves Taylor to give a wealth of attention to humanism, examining providential Deism in depth before articulating how this moved us into exclusive humanism, where individual human flourishing became the end of existence itself. This reality, for Taylor, is how we have gotten to where we are today. Deep within our societal bloodstream is this understanding of the self focused on individual personal flourishing, meaning that we feel little obligation to others (whether God or neighbor).

Therefore, for Taylor, unbelief has its origins in belief itself. Atheism is contingent on the existence of religion, for without it atheism would lack enough solidity to be anything at all. But that said, Taylor reminds the reader that, in our world, taken-for-granted belief is impossible; doubt cannot be expunged. If people are going to believe in God, they will have to do so in a context where it is so easy not to believe.

This, if anything, is the very reason that a pastor should pick up this heavy (in weight and price) text. While the book is a dense read, test-

ing the reader's patience, with enough concentration and reflection the reader will find a treasure within its pages. But this is not a book for the uncommitted; it is a piece that comes with the rewards and burdens of being one of the most important philosophical works of this young century.

Andrew Root  
Luther Seminary  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

**EVERYONE WHO ACTS RESPONSIBLY BECOMES GUILTY: BONHOEFFER'S CONCEPT OF ACCEPTING GUILT**, by Christine Schliesser. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. Pp. 217. \$34.95 (paper).

As the author of this book points out, there is no lack of scholarship on the theme of the life and theology of the twentieth-century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Yet, in this volume, Christine Schliesser brings to light what she believes to be a long-neglected theme

in Bonhoeffer's thought: the idea that the Christian community should be the community that bears the guilt of others. Schliesser connects this theme to a twofold definition of the church in Bonhoeffer's theology. Bonhoeffer taught that the Christian church is Jesus Christ existing as community as well as the community which exists for others. The connection between these two aspects of the church's identity is the church's ministry of vicariously bearing the guilt of others (39). Schliesser argues that Bonhoeffer sees Jesus Christ as the paschal Lamb who bears away the sins of the world, and that he views the church's ministry of bearing the guilt of others as the specific way in which the church becomes the community of Christ existing for the sake of others. As Christ took upon himself the guilt of the world and carried it away, the church in its role of Christ existing as community fulfills its role of being a community for others through its members becoming guilty for the sake of others (75). As it fulfills this role and enters into its calling of bearing the burdens of others, the church also opens itself up as a community that welcomes sinners into the body of Jesus Christ (94).

Schliesser highlights that in approaching this role of the church as the body of Christ, which vicariously bears away the guilt of others, Bonhoeffer distinguishes between actively incurred guilt and non-actively incurred guilt. Actively incurred guilt is the guilt that one incurs by violating a specific precept of the law of God. Non-actively incurred guilt, on the other hand, is the guilt of another that one incurs as one enters into the guilt of the other through counseling and pastoral care. The church is primarily called to non-actively incurred guilt, but there may be times when the church is also called to actively incur guilt for the sake of others as well, for example, Bonhoeffer's participation in the conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler (180–181).

Schliesser outlines how the majority of Bonhoeffer scholarship has either entirely

passed over the theme of the church as the community that bears the guilt of others or mentioned it only briefly. She then follows this theme throughout Bonhoeffer's works, from his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorium Communio* through his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which he composed in his last years while held captive by the government of the Third Reich. After surveying Bonhoeffer's articulation of his theme in each of his works, Schliesser explores some of the tensions it creates within Bonhoeffer's thought as well as some of the general questions it raises. Schliesser takes a critical approach to the notion of the church's members becoming guilty for the sake of others, pointing out some causes for concern inherent in this idea. Such causes for concern include the lack of a working definition of guilt in Bonhoeffer's thought (190) and the idea that believers actually function as Christ to others (182). Schliesser also questions the nature of the relationship between Bonhoeffer's idea that the church may be called at times to enter into actively incurred guilt for the sake of others and the climactic events of his own life (191).

Schliesser closes by commending Bonhoeffer's theory of the church as the community that becomes guilty on the basis of its value for the ethical task today. She posits that Bonhoeffer's communal approach to guilt fills a need for the community's participation in the ethical realm, a need that is especially accentuated by postmodernism's individualization of ethics. Schliesser suggests that Bonhoeffer's communal ethic of guilt-bearing could be especially helpful in the areas of counseling and pastoral care that occur within the context of the community (203).

This study of Bonhoeffer's notion of the church's vicarious bearing of the guilt of others certainly has potential value for parish pastors who seek to do theology and ethics in the reality of their parishioner's real life experiences. Yet, this book also has its drawbacks for practical usage. The first drawback is that this book

is Schliesser's doctoral dissertation and, as such, contains a rather lengthy and in-depth literature review as well as some fairly erudite terminology. The lengthy footnotes and somewhat frequent untranslated German phrases certainly make the book appear daunting. The second drawback is the work's complete lack of any kind of case study or contextual situation aside from the events of Bonhoeffer's own life narrative. Few if any pastors or lay ministers will actually find themselves in a situation quite as extreme as Bonhoeffer's, but they might like to know what his theory could look like in practice. A third drawback to this book is its complete lack of discussion concerning what happens with guilt and the church members who incur it once it passes from the other to members of the Christian community. Schliesser does not discuss any kind of an absolution that might be part of the guilt-bearing process. Pastors and other ministers who regularly participate in corporate and private confession and absolution may find this lack of discussion of absolution unhelpful and even disconcerting. It is one thing for Christians to bear away the guilt of others, but it is quite another for Christians to remain under the weight of that guilt.

In spite of these drawbacks, Schliesser's book still holds great value for pastors and other ministers involved in activities such as counseling and pastoral care in the parish context or in other contexts of Christian community. Moreover, Bonhoeffer's idea, which Schliesser highlights, links aspects of both Christology and soteriology with what it means for the church to be the church for others. This could prove helpful to a pastor in leading his or her congregation in understanding the connection between Christ's vicarious work as Savior and their part in Christ's mission to a guilty people in a fallen world.

Joshua C. Miller  
Luther Seminary  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

**GOD'S POTTERS: PASTORAL LEADERSHIP AND THE SHAPING OF CONGREGATIONS**, by Jackson W. Carroll. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. Pp. xvi + 296. \$30.00 (paper).

In *God's Potters*, Jackson W. Carroll presents another in the series of publications based on findings from the Pulpit & Pew research project. In this book, Carroll reports on findings from solo pastoral leaders or senior pastoral leaders of congregational staffs. Data were collected from a variety of sources: a national telephone survey of clergy, focus groups of pastors, and a national survey of congregations. While the data did not allow for findings to be reported for individual denominations, results were reported by four traditions of denominations: Catholic, mainline Protestant, conservative Protestant, and historic Black churches.

Using the scriptural text of 2 Cor 4:7, Carroll uses the metaphor of "earthen vessels" or "clay jars" for congregations. He then extends the metaphor to think of clergy who lead these congregations as "potters" (1–2). Carroll then extols his foundational argument for leadership, that clergy are "producers of congregational culture...or at least decisively shape a congregation's culture" (25). By congregational culture he means "expressing and transmitting religious meanings through worship and religious education," with the outcomes that these clergy "help members locate themselves and find meaning and perspective for dealing with issues in their daily lives,...help build community and supportive relationships...[and help members] engage in their own ministry beyond the congregation in their family, work, and community life" (25–26). To frame this concept of pastor as producer of congregational culture, Carroll uses Griswold's Cultural Diamond Model to note the elements in the process. These are: cultural creator (pastor), cultural receiver (congregation), the social world (context), and cultural

objects (Scripture, traditions, practices, models of ministry, etc.). According to this model, leaders use cultural objects within a social world to construct a culture in the congregation (26–27).

Carroll presents findings from his research around the topics of the social and cultural context in which clergy work, characteristics of pastors serving (including ordained and lay pastors), what clergy do and how they spend their time, how pastors lead (issues of style, authority, and engagement in setting a congregation's agenda), problems clergy face (issues of commitment to call, physical and emotional health, burnout, congregational conflict, financial pressures, and job satisfaction), and excellence in ministry and leadership.

The research presented in *God's Potters* is comprehensive in its scope, addressing numerous topics important to ministry. Conclusions presented by the researchers are well supported by quantitative and qualitative data, and their work is a fine example of conducting and reporting mixed-methods social scientific research. Altogether this research presents a significant view of a group of pastoral leaders across a variety of congregations. It should be noted that this view is a cross-sectional view, giving a snapshot of solo and senior staff pastoral leaders at one point in time. As such, the results cannot be seen as representative of all pastors or congregational leaders, but only of pastors serving as solo pastors or as senior pastors of congregational staffs.

In spite of the clarity of findings and the broad scope of the research, there are some aspects of the research that need to be considered more closely. The assertion that pastors create congregational culture is a foundation for this research. One could conclude that when a congregation does not have a pastor there is no congregational culture being created. Yet, it seems likely that congregations continue to

create congregational culture even if there is no pastor present.

The fact that the research gathered information from the senior pastors on pastoral staffs also is related to the assertion that these pastors create congregational culture. On congregational staffs, different leaders are assigned to oversight and responsibility for particular areas of ministry. This means that, even though the senior pastor might provide direction and make decisions about the overall ministry direction, it is the other staff members who are actually involved in the personal interactions and activities in their respective ministry areas. Therefore, it seems likely that it is these staff persons who are most directly doing the activities of ministry and creating the culture with people involved in their areas of ministry, as opposed to the senior pastors.

While quite comprehensive in their scope, it is difficult to know what exactly the findings of this research tell us about pastoral leadership. One reason for this is the numerous factors that could be influencing the differences found in the study. Denominations, even those in the same family, can have significant diversity in leadership training and evaluation. There could be a cohort effect in those studied, since senior pastoral leaders of congregational staffs are likely to be older and to have numerous years of pastoral experience, while solo pastoral leaders of smaller, and rural or inner city congregations, particularly those in their first or second calls, might well be younger with fewer years of pastoral experience. Such cohort differences could mean that the pastors were trained when there were differing emphases and expectations for leaders. Socioeconomic and contextual factors could impact findings, particularly for the rural and Black leaders. How these factors affect the findings is difficult to ascertain.

In spite of these considerations, *God's Potters* presents important findings for pastoral leaders to consider. It is an informative and

thought-provoking resource for those interested in issues of leadership in the church.

Alvin J. Luedke  
Luther Seminary  
Saint Paul, Minnesota

**PERFORMANCE IN PREACHING:  
BRINGING THE SERMON TO LIFE,**  
edited by Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008. Pp. 256. \$24.99 (paper).

The title of this admirable volume of essays will disturb some potential readers, and excite others in ways that might disturb the members of their congregations who have already been subjected to their “performances” in the pulpit (or out of it). Read the book anyway.

The reader should expect subtle surprises. So many things, from the title of the volume to the topics covered in the essays, seem obvious. This is a book about preaching, so of course preachers would want to “bring the sermon to life.” This is a book about preaching, so of course there needs to be an essay about truthfulness, about body and voice, and one about the creative process. One could even compile a list of pithy sayings out of the essays, and they would sound ordinary and useful in an obvious way. In this book, as in a good sermon, there is more going on than first meets the eye. The writers of these essays, preachers all and teachers of preachers, have thought long and hard about performance, and that makes a difference. Performance changes everything. These essays make that point both repeatedly and persuasively.

When Marguerite Shuster discusses truth and truthfulness in the first essay, she does not launch into a dissection of truth as an abstraction; she considers the relationship between truth and incarnation, both for Jesus and for anyone who would proclaim the gospel. “[H]uman beings,” she says, “are so constituted that how they use their bodies cannot be separated from what they say when they speak

in public” (32). Truthfulness in preaching requires, therefore, that we “[seek] a certain wholeness in what we do, never forgetting that we are doing it, first and foremost, before the God who cannot be deceived and who will not be mocked” (35). This is no simple theological statement, and it is not part of any simple exhortation to gesture effectively when delivering the Truth from the pulpit. Shuster is arguing that truth is at stake in the physical mechanics of preaching, and that careful attention to performance analysis will provide a sharp and useful tool for theological analysis.

When Paul Scott Wilson discusses preaching and time, he is not simply setting the sermon somewhere between God’s oncoming future and the biblical past, perching it on the unstable rolling ball of the present moment. Wilson is up to much more. Study of performance has taught him that “performance requires death” (47), particularly the “death of now.” Actors have taught me the same lesson. Any actor onstage who is aware of herself onstage is not acting but is distracting. Every actor learns what Wilson points out: “The preacher, like any performer, gives...herself over to the performance, that is, to God” (47).

In these essays, preachers are being given access to the resources discovered by actors and musicians through millennia of practical and theoretical reflections on the fact of performance. Todd Farley (who teaches speech and drama at Calvin College) quotes Martin Luther about the role of the body in worship, and then goes on to say, “Like the mime, the preacher enters onto the platform with only the body to perform the text” (133). Farley, himself a student of Marcel Marceau, knows what it means to perform as a mime. His careful juxtaposition of wordy and wordless performance makes a powerful point. You could read Farley’s essay and take from it some advice about practicing gesture as part of the sermon, but Farley means to argue that preaching reverses the process preserved in the text of Scripture. Farley quotes Charles Bartow, who

hears in every biblical text an “arrested performance” by which “blood turned into ink” (117). Farley argues that preaching has the task of “turning ink into blood” (138). This is what the subtitle of the book means when it calls for brining the sermon “to life.” This is not a matter of enlivening a moribund sermon so that it lurches around the sanctuary for a few minutes. The preachers in this volume argue that proclamation happens when the living body of the preacher meets the living bodies of the listeners in the context of worship. Life meets life, and a physical argument is made for the truth that makes preaching necessary.

The volume includes a DVD of lectures, interviews, and performances of biblical texts and sermons. The DVD demonstrates the central argument of the essays, but does so ironically, as anyone who has ever watched a video of a stage play might predict. When the breathing body of the performer meets the mechanical corpse of the video camera, the life often drains out, and the delighted reactions of the (unseen) audience serve as an index of how

much has been lost. Live performance requires live bodies encountering each other in the unrepeatable present. (I would offer the same critique of the DVDs that accompany my *Provoking the Gospel* commentaries on the gospels.) This is part of what Paul Scott Wilson means when he speaks of the “death of now” in performance. Watch the DVD anyhow, if only because it will make you wish for a living encounter with actual performance of text and sermon.

Preachers will want to discover what this book knows about interpreting the Bible in front of a living congregation. People who teach preachers will want to soak their students in the reflections contained in this volume. Worship planners will want to read this book because it will challenge them to look always for ways to read the words of Scripture and turn the ink back to living blood.

Richard W. Swanson  
Augustana College  
Sioux Falls, South Dakota