

Reviews



GAY THEOLOGY WITHOUT APOLOGY,
by Gary David Comstock. Cleveland,
Ohio: Pilgrim, 1993. Pp. 183.

In 1983 Gary David Comstock was beginning his program as a doctoral student at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He was also working as a volunteer counselor for the Gay Men's Health Crisis where he met Esteban, a poor Puerto Rican gay man, who died from AIDS shortly thereafter. What impressed Comstock about Esteban was his refusal to take on the role of victim.

Ten years later Esteban has become the model for one of the fruits of Comstock's theological work, a "gay theology without apology." Comstock also has refused to become a victim of either society's or the church's inability to take seriously the reality of gay and lesbian persons. Like Esteban, Comstock refuses to be defined by or fit in to the expectations prescribed by others. The result is a gay theology without apology in which the Bible and Christianity are examined

not with the purpose of fitting in or finding a place in them, but of fitting them into and changing them according to the particular experiences of lesbian/bisexual/gay people.

Christian Scriptures and tradition are not authorities from which I seek approval; rather they are resources from which I seek guidance and learn lessons as well as institutions that I seek to interpret, shape, and change. (4)

Beginning from such a premise, Comstock, a United Church of Christ pastor, campus chaplain, and visiting assistant professor, has written a theology that invites dialogue, critique, and finally a re-examination of both the way theology is usually done and much of what is asserted by those writing from within mainstream Christianity. Comstock's theology is a theology grounded in his experience as a gay Christian. It is an experience, however, that

has found so little resonance and so little respect within the Christian tradition and the Christian church that he has had to re-cast the whole theological enterprise.

Rather than understanding scripture as a parental authority, scripture is to be viewed as a friend, "as one to whom I have made a commitment and in whom I have invested dearly, but with whom I insist on a mutual exchange of critique, encouragement, support, and challenge" (11). Such an approach to scripture recognizes its patriarchal origins, its homophobic characteristics, and its tendency to favor the interests of the privileged and the powerful. But to treat scripture as a friend is also to see scriptures as a resource for moral agency; it is to read the stories of Queen Vashti and Esther, and David and Jonathan, for example, with new eyes and new insight. Thus, "instead of trying to copy what is done in the Bible, our confrontation with the Bible becomes a model for confronting the moral dilemmas we face in our lives today" (57).

The re-examination of scripture and scriptural authority is complemented by a similar re-examination of the Christian tradition. And, as already noted, the customary third resource for theological reflection and formation, that of personal experience, is also re-considered and given stronger weight.

The results of this re-examination are provocative and challenging even if in need of more development. For example, Comstock reaffirms the centrality of the Exodus event and the ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus for our lives as Christians. He treats them, however, primarily in their relation to the ethical life of Christians. They are ethical norms and function as a principle having a profound effect on Christian ministry. As stories about the overcoming and transforming of human pain, suffering, and death, they challenge Christians who are "born of these events" not to see their identity as those who bear

and endure pain but as “those who transform it” (10).

As Christians are called to transform pain, Comstock sees theology as a transformative enterprise. It is not an abstract discipline and Comstock’s theology is not a detached, dispassionate theology. It is theology designed to be in the service of Christian ministry.

Central to Christian ministry is the development of relationships and the building of community in which such relationships can be encouraged, nourished, and supported. “I understand Christian ministry to be the building of community in which people are encouraged to participate and contribute, to share and develop themselves, to be taken seriously, to take others seriously, to recognize and be recognized” (20). Such relationships are especially important for those currently disenfranchised by the dominant society. Thus, the goal of Christian ministry can also be described as fighting for basic human rights, being there for each other, loving one another, recognizing and facili-

tating the power of the disempowered to change their lives, taking responsibility for our own lives and “making them full and responsive to the lives around us” (102).

The emphasis on befriending scripture, transforming situations of pain and suffering, and engaging in ministry which nourishes relationships and builds community gives to Comstock’s theology a liberationist cast. It also leads to re-interpreting most of the traditional categories of Christian theology in terms of present and current realities. Thus, God is understood as “among, between and part of us” (129), rather than as above, outside, or other than us. Likewise, sin seems to be better understood as an action – violation of mutuality and reciprocity, institutionalized denial of participation in the social order, and interpersonal violation – than as a condition.

Salvation also takes on a distinctly personal and relational character in which God works with us in the creation of relationships of partnership, mutuality and reciprocity. Salvific moments are uncontrollable, unexpected, unplanned occur-

rences in ordinary human experience in which nonmutual, nonreciprocal power is resisted and unjust relationships give way to relationships in which responsibility, authenticity, and cooperation hold sway.

Comstock's gay theology without apology is a bold, self-confident attempt to argue that the pain and suffering of the disempowered, especially the pain and suffering of gay, bisexual, and lesbian persons, demands a re-thinking and then a recasting of Christian theology. It is an attempt that is not yet finished.

For some, the whole enterprise will appear to be wrong-headed and Comstock's arguments will get little hearing and no response. For others, however, this honest and provocative effort can lead to the kind of re-thinking that will benefit the whole church. Some may find his understanding of God "as the mutuality and reciprocity in our relationships" excessively personalistic; others may challenge the understanding of Jesus as "our saving one another from loneliness, despair, abuse, and neglect" (138) as obviously inadequate. But to dismiss his theology is to lose the opportunity to engage in dialogue with one whose experience will not allow him either to give up his faith or deny his existence as a gay man. Someone willing to be responsible to both those dimensions of his life deserves to be heard.

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JONAH, A COMMENTARY, by James Limburg. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993.

James Limburg's commentary on Jonah in the Old Testament Library series is everything a good commentary should be. He has done a thorough job of working through the text, he has discussed key words and phrases with broad consideration of other uses of those terms in relevant sources, and he has been ecumenical in his survey of interpretations of the document to the point of including Islamic material. He is impressively thorough, yet he has managed to make his work as accessible to

lay persons or busy pastors as to professional teachers of the Bible. It is neatly organized and easy to use—though one realizes that the editors may deserve some credit for that. In short, it is a model of its type.

To give the reader an example of the compactness and quality of his comments I quote two paragraphs from page 25:

One is struck by the fact that this short book contains fourteen questions. In the first part of the story, all of the questions are directed at Jonah. The captain questions him (1:6). The sailors interrogate him with seven questions (1:8, 10, 11). In the psalms, Jonah asks a question of the Lord (2:4). The king of Nineveh asks a rhetorical question (3:9). In the final chapter, Jonah puts a question to the Lord (4:2) and the Lord/God addresses three questions to Jonah (4:4, 9, 11).

If a story is skillfully told, the storyteller can use questions to put each listener in the place of the one being questioned. The eight questions in Jonah thus lead the listener to put himself or herself in the role of Jonah. Hans Walter Wolff comments on the fact that Jonah is never called "prophet" in the book: "In the course of the narrative Jonah is more the one who is questioned than the one who preaches." What does it mean for the understanding of the story if the hearer or reader takes the place of Jonah? Wolff points to Jonah's own answer in 1:9: "I am a Hebrew." The Jonah story is thus addressed to each individual Israelite or to each individual who is a part of the people of God....

A major emphasis for Limburg is the didactic purpose of the book. To demonstrate that he has enumerated several factors.

1. It is a lesson story about a prophet rather than the message of the prophet.
2. It is parabolic.
3. It is built around rhetorical questions, as seen in the quotation above.
4. As is characteristic of didactic material, it seems designed for oral to aural transmission.

In delineating its lessons, Limburg has worked the text from within, concentrating on what the main character is learning through dramatic, dialogical scenes. He has also noticed that this has been a dominant

approach in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

His understanding of the Hebrew language is impressive, as is his general control of Old Testament literature. He makes extratextual connections in helpful and convincing ways. This reader felt enlightened at many points. Matters of literary form and construction are handled perceptively. The discussion of the psalm portion of the text in chapter two is particularly well done. One matter of apparent textual corruption is overlooked. In 2:10 the translation should read: "Then the LORD said (not "spoke") to the fish...," with a small gap in the text following.

This reviewer finds shortfall in two matters. In many years of teaching biblical Hebrew I have used Jonah for prose review in the second semester of the course. As I take students fairly rapidly through the narrative they and I are always entertained by the humor that emerges as the story flows from scene to scene. Partly because the complete story cannot be found in one piece and partly because Limburg's carefully correct translation of the text avoids any humorous style, the reader is not exposed to that discovery.

As in most commentaries, Limburg has worked subtext by subtext, as seminarians are trained to do in exegetical exercises. Perhaps he had preachers in mind as primary readers of the commentary.

Related to this first shortfall, in the reviewer's mind, is the need to set the story into the frame of early Jewish history. While noting well that ecumenism is a central message here, Limburg did not sufficiently explore where that fits into the historical scheme. He does not ponder enough about which version of Israel/Judah is best represented by the lead character. One thinks easily of the narrow concerns of the leaders Ezra and Nehemiah as they are described in the pair of books that carry their names. Should not the Book of Jonah, along with the Book of Ruth and the 56th chapter of Isaiah, be understood as arguments against that attitude? Indeed, if one begins with Isaiah 40-55 and takes seriously its attitude toward Cyrus, there seems to have been an ecumenical point of view stemming out of the Isaiah tradition. Surely the disciples and writers within that

tradition had noticed the strong tendencies toward monotheistic thinking among Persians and Greeks.

Through the book, Limburg has emphasized what he very often calls its theological concern. So often does he do this, in fact, that one suspects he is fulfilling an editorial assignment that requires it to be obviously theological. A true bonus in the book is his delightful attention to artists and artistic interpretations down through the centuries. This makes it distinct as commentaries go.

Despite the criticism mentioned about missing the humor of the text, Limburg's own comments are not without humor, which includes genuine appreciation of Jewish midrashic material. In that spirit the reviewer suggests one fresh note relevant to comments on pp. 112-113, namely this, that perhaps the fish had to change from male to female precisely because it had Jonah in its belly. It was pregnant with a disagreeable prophet.

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**HISTORY AND THE TRIUNE GOD:
CONTRIBUTIONS TO TRINITARIAN
THEOLOGY**, by Jürgen Moltmann. New York: Crossroad, 1992.

In this collection of essays Moltmann offers his own trinitarian view of history as he discusses the history of trinitarian doctrine. These essays expand the implications of his own social doctrine of the trinity which he presented in his important 1980 book, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*. In the present volume the articles are arranged in two main sections. Those in Part I represent contributions to the theology of the trinity itself. Those in Part II are theological conversations with other thinkers who for a variety of reasons have been part of Moltmann's own theological journey, among whom are: Joachim of Fiore, Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and Ernst Bloch.

The basic theological melody in these contributions will sound familiar to those

who have heard him before: patriarchy, monarchy, and divine suffering; lordship, fellowship, and friendship; oppression, justice, solidarity, and hope. Still, Moltmann's improvisational dexterity continues to make him interesting and engaging. He does sound an atonement note that is, as he himself admits, newly accented and with which I resonate, at least partly. His trinitarian theology of the cross has stressed a christology of solidarity with victims. For contextual reasons he has not focused on reconciliation with perpetrators of injustice and oppression, for such reconciliation can be offered only by the victims. "However, it is right that from such a christology of solidarity for the victims an atoning christology for the perpetrators should also emerge" (xvii). In the past that chord has been played *piano*, here he intones the one who *bears* the suffering and the sin of the world — *forte*. Bravo!

Moltmann strikes another notable chord that does not emerge forthrightly in his major trinity book: the connection between the Spirit and nature. The context of this essay is the theme for the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches, "Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation." Here Moltmann connects St. Paul's understanding that the Spirit cries out with our spirits with the whole creation's prayerful cry in the face of environmental endangerment. Moltmann establishes the Spirit's role in creation, in the preservation of creation, and in the new creation of all things.

The essay, "The Inviting Unity of the Triune God," is perhaps the best, brief aria of trinitarian theology today. Here Moltmann focuses on how and why the doctrine of the trinity can only be properly based in the biblical narrative of the history of salvation. He convincingly stakes out his own claim in distinction from various classical positions as well as from the twentieth-century proposals of Barth and Rahner. Moltmann articulates an inviting "open Trinity" in which salvation as communion "takes place by the Son accepting human beings into his relationship with the Father and making them children, sons and daughters, of the Father...[and] by the Holy Spirit accepting human beings into his relationship with the Son and the Father and

letting them participate in his eternal love and his eternal song of praise" (87). If you have not read his major trinitarian work, then this essay alone would justify reading this book.

A surprise bonus lies within these covers. This book ends with a theological autobiographical essay from 1985. Here Moltmann gives an account of social contexts and theological contacts. He understands his various books by orienting them around three methodological approaches which he undertook along an overlapping linear time frame: the whole of the theology in one focal point (1964-1975); theology in movement, dialogue, and conflict (1971-1985); and parts as contributions to the whole (1980-present).

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TWELVE TALES UNTOLD: A STUDY GUIDE FOR ECUMENICAL RECEPTION, ed. by John T. Ford and Darlis J. Swan. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993. Pp. 188.

This compact and engaging book explores the issue of ecumenical reception. It not only discusses the concept as part of a doctrine of ecumenism but also involves the reader in the process through participation in a number of case studies. One of the assumptions underlying this collection is that contemporary Christians are necessarily ecumenical; it is a given of their social reality. "Most people encounter ecumenism through everyday situations as members of different traditions deal with their differences and work out agreements" (2). The setting may be the local community food pantry, the baptism of a child, or the diverse student body at a divinity school. Moreover, "ecumenism is not a matter of the 'scholarly level' in contrast to the 'practical level'" (2). The contributors to this volume show that the questions are of one fabric; practical situations always reflect theological questions and vice versa. The choice before Christians is not whether they will be ecumenical but how they will be

ecumenical, and *Twelve Tales Untold* sets a nice tone, inviting readers to take up the task with a sense of competence and excitement.

The book begins with a brief introduction and two essays explaining the pedagogy employed. As one of the editors points out, ecumenical education needs to permeate the life of the worshipping community rather than remain an isolated topic for a single adult forum or church school session. More than a discrete subject, ecumenism is a perspective one needs to bring to every theological discussion, be it about sacraments, biblical authority, or discipleship. Then follow twelve case studies, organized around the three topics of the 1982 ecumenical study, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), prepared by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. The final section offers three "Ecumenical Reflections": "Reception of Ecumenism: A Theological Rationale," "Reception in American Culture: Tendencies and Temptations," and "Reception at the Local and Regional Levels." The first of these essays I found particularly interesting as it took up the difficult questions of the authority of ecumenical texts, reading with ecumenical openness, and the ecumenical move from reconciliation to conversion to reception. The editors have included a selected bibliography around BEM, reception, and COCU (the Consultation on Church Union), as well as a helpful glossary of churches and ecumenical organizations. The latter is a basic who's who for identifying churches and groups mentioned in the text and offers brief historical commentary where needed.

The ordering of the contents serves the contributors' purpose well. The ecumenical imperative often falls on resistant, even hostile ears. By engaging the readers with case studies first and then presenting the more theoretical and hortatory essays, the volume makes the "musts" of ecumenical commitment feel more promising than onerous. Moreover, care has been taken to present a diversity of denomination, gender, and cultural experience in the case studies. This is done deftly, not with ponderous political correctness.

The case studies are designed to help

participants identify and appreciate the theological issues and spiritual values that distinguish the various communities represented. All twelve relate actual experiences. The authors suggest possible outcomes, with the purpose of encouraging participants to reflect on what would constitute a good resolution and what other options they might propose. The criteria for evaluating a solution are its being theologically justifiable, pastorally appropriate, and ecumenically creative. One gets drawn into the process of complex problem solving and is challenged to think within the framework of other Christian communities. Facing their dilemmas, the reader cannot help but ask, "Why was that a problem for them? Would it be a problem for my church?" Thus, one acquires a deeper knowledge of one's own community as well as of other groups of Christians.

When readers come to the final essays, particularly the discussion of conversion and thinking with ecumenical openness, their having worked with the case studies makes these more theoretical considerations meaningful. An ecumenically principled discipleship requires an action-reflection model of formation, beginning with concrete experience and returning to it again and again, as this volume makes clear. *Twelve Tales Untold* is a wonderful resource for adult study groups, especially ecumenically mixed ones.

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION, by J. Philip Wogaman. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993. Pp. 352. \$19.99 (paper).

J. Philip Wogaman's valuable contributions to the field of Christian ethics have included *Christian Moral Judgment* and *The Great Economic Debate: An Ethical Analysis*. We may now add to that list his most recent work, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction*. This effort may well supersede George Forell's (unfinished?) attempt to produce a three-volume *History of Christian Ethics*. Wogaman's one-volume presentation

scans the vast and diverse Christian ethical perspectives from the earliest biblical literature to the most recent contributions of liberation theology and ecumenical ethics.

Wogaman's historical introduction is very scholarly and remarkably lucid and engaging. Wogaman is certainly aware of the challenge and limits of his own efforts in his introductory remarks:

In writing a book such as this, I am freshly conscious of how inadequate even the most thorough work of history must be. For one is selecting out of an immense sea those buckets of fact and insight that seem, to the writer, to be partially significant. There is so much that must be neglected! But if it is a sin to be more superficial than we have to be, it may even be worse to allow ourselves to be paralyzed by the fear of necessary incompleteness. If incompleteness is inevitable, so too, lamentably, is bias. (ix-x)

Those remarks provide an important qualification, as well as an important caveat, for the reader of this historical introduction.

Wogaman examines specific persons and movements within the six major periods he has identified: the early biblical and philosophical legacies, early Christianity, medieval Christianity, the reformation, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rationalism and evangelicalism, and twentieth-century ethics. The concluding seventh part of his tome provides a brief prognosis for Christian ethics on the threshold of the third millennium. One will recognize, of course, that Wogaman's history of ethics is not proportional. About a third of the book spans the entire biblical development and the first 1500 years of the church's history, another third is on ethics from 1500-1900, and the final third summarizes ethics in the twentieth-century, bringing us to the precipice of the next century. Nevertheless, it is reasonably comprehensive for a one-volume historical survey; and one will be pleasantly surprised by Wogaman's succinct and insightful presentation of classical and enlightenment philosophers, well-known classical theologians (like Augustine, Luther, and Calvin) and lesser-known sects (like the English "Levelers" and "Diggers"). His analysis of the twentieth-century contributions is excep-

tionally well constructed, with the social gospel and liberation theology forming similar bookends. It even includes Wogaman's humble assessment of his own contributions to this era.

Wogaman's reflections on Christian ethics are organized around six polar "tensions" which he traces to the biblical literature itself. These include the contrasting categories of revelation and reason, materialism and spirituality, universalism and group identity, grace and law, love and force, status and equality. Throughout his analysis, Wogaman demonstrates how one or more of these extremes has tended to dominate the ethical concerns of any given historical period. A sub-theme throughout the book no doubt corresponds with some of these "tensions" in that Wogaman addresses specific ethical issues such as economics, war, racism, and human sexuality (including sexism). This sub-theme is in keeping with Wogaman's desire "to bring twentieth-century questions and problems to bear in examining the thinkers of earlier periods" (x), and it does add to the reader's appreciation and enjoyment. Nevertheless, the issues are not always dealt with evenly throughout the book. For example, issues related to human sexuality and gender, while prominent in the early church and medieval historical analysis, are dropped until the discussion of the nineteenth-century feminist movement. As much as Wogaman insists on what "we have seen" about this subject (186), one might at least expect an explanation of some kind for this lacuna during the reformation and the early enlightenment. By contrast, the subjects of war and economy are more evenly developed throughout. However, one might have expected further comment on the religious and ethical implications of the Thirty Years War (even for the shift toward rationalism) besides Wogaman's ephemeral and brief remarks about "interreligious conflict and civil war" (152).

More serious concerns might be raised with regard to Wogaman's "tension" categories. While the six categories of "tension" certainly form a presuppositional basis for Wogaman's presentation, it is not altogether clear how Wogaman understands the import or meaning of "tension" as a

category of thought in the historical development of ethics. This ambiguity becomes especially obvious when Wogaman adds a seventh "tension" of absolutism versus relativism in ethical theory, decisively arguing that "radical moral relativism would destroy this or any other form of ethics" (276). Furthermore, his biblical presentation is much too brief to make his case convincing that "a moral hermeneutic" underscoring six "tensions" (why six? why these?) is an adequate basis for a "canon within the canon" (3).

In this light, I also note the acute absence in much of Wogaman's treatment of what Paul and especially Luther regarded as the canon within the canon: "justification by faith." Wogaman often tends to use the word "grace" in these instances (9, 109), and even claims that "love" is the central category in the tradition (270), misrepresenting or perhaps ignoring his own citations from those sources of the tradition which clearly show a preference for the word "faith" (9, 110-111). The difference with Wogaman here is not simply semantic; it has to do with an important theological qualification which Paul and the reformers (and the *Augustana* in particular, which is regrettably neglected by Wogaman) considered very significant in their

controversy with their critics, to say nothing of its enduring value and place in the Christian tradition as a whole. Nothing against "love" and "grace," mind you; but without "faith" in its crucified and risen Lord, Christian ethics and its tradition will remain remarkably hollow, as Wogaman himself seems to affirm (at least implicitly) in his own beautifully-phrased concluding sentence: "*Faithful* Christian ethics must do its work in the future, murky though that future may be, *confident* that it is *responding to one whose love is boundless*" (284; the italics are mine). Is it not "faith" which makes the "responding" (and loving) worthwhile?

I must emphasize, however, that any and all criticisms I have offered of Wogaman's text in the aforementioned remarks are intended to be mild. One cannot credit Wogaman enough for the valuable service he has provided in this overview of the Christian ethical tradition. Academically, this book may serve well at either the undergraduate or graduate level in introductory courses in Christian ethics. With all due qualifications cited by this reviewer, Wogaman's text is highly recommended for all students of ethics.

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