

# Reviews



**DANIEL: A COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF DANIEL**, by John J. Collins. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993. Pp. xxxiv +499. \$45.00.

This fine commentary on the book of Daniel is a worthy addition to the Hermeneia Series and fulfills very well the stated purposes of this series: to provide a detailed, systematic exposition of a scriptural work utilizing the full range of critical and historical tools—including textual criticism, the history of tradition, and the history of religion—in order to discuss problems of interpretation and to lay bare the ancient meaning of biblical texts, that one might be led towards discovering the text's human relevance for our own time.

With the coming of a new millennium, Christians can expect a renewed interest in and increased misuse of biblical apocalyptic, including the book of Daniel. It is tempting to ignore apocalyptic, abandoning it to the fringe groups. Yet, sincere Christians become confused or puzzled or even led astray when we ignore the context and meaning of apocalyptic for our own day. Because apocalyptic has so often been ignored or left to the fringe groups, Daniel has often been thought to be irrelevant or too strange to even try to use in church life. This commentary by John J. Collins will give you a different picture of Daniel, and will give you the tools to conduct an enriching Bible study on the book or even preach on some of the texts, giving parishioners new insights as 2000 draws near.

This commentary is very thorough and yet very readable. John J. Collins is one of the leading scholars of apocalyptic in our time, and his insights make Daniel readable and understandable to all who bother to study it. The helpful introduction lays a good foundation for study of the text itself, paying attention to literary forms and is-

sues, dealing with such things as genre, setting, and purpose of both the tales (Dan 1-6) and the visions (Dan 7-12). An especially helpful part of the introduction is a section, "The Influence of Daniel on the New Testament," by Adela Yarbro Collins, showing Daniel's influence on and relationship with the book of Revelation, but also establishing links with other parts of the New Testament.

The author, as one might expect, sees Daniel as a prime example of *ex eventu prophecy*, written much later than the Exile, which is the literary setting of the book. He sees the tales as earlier than the visions, but even the tales are much later than the Exile, and he offers evidence to support his conclusions. The late dating of Daniel also helps get at the meaning of the book.

The commentary itself is a chapter by chapter, verse by verse exposition of the text. He respectfully discusses other possible interpretations that have been offered through the years and then is clear about his own position. Of particular help are four excursus sections that elaborate on four key phrases in Daniel: "the four kingdoms" (Dan 2), "one like a human being" (7:13), "holy ones of the Most High" (7:18, 25), and "resurrection" (Dan 12), all of which are crucial to understanding Daniel, and have implications for New Testament interpretation and Christianity.

His interpretation of Daniel 7 is interesting. The "one like a human being" ("son of man" in the RSV) of Dan 7:13 is seen as Michael, the prince of angels and guardian angel of Israel, and the "holy ones of the Most High" (7:18, 25) are the angelic host. He offers strong evidence that the phrase "holy ones" often referred to angelic or celestial beings in the literature of that time. He bases this interpretation on the common apocalyptic notion that the battle on earth

between good and evil had a counterpart in the heavens, between God and evil forces. As God gave dominion in heaven to Michael and the angelic host, so God is with God's people on earth and some day will also give them the kingdom that will last forever. This was a message of hope to the suffering Jews under Antiochus Epiphanes and is also a message of hope to suffering people in our own day. This reading also has implications for New Testament interpretation when we hear about the return of the "Son of Man who will come in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Matt 16:27; Mark. 8:38; Luke 9:26). The "one like a human being" is not a prediction of Jesus, nor is it even messianic in Daniel. But the NT writers have re-interpreted the Daniel passage and applied it to the second coming of Christ.

One strength of this commentary is its clear presentation of the insights of one of the best apocalyptic scholars of our time in a way that is both usable and helpful for pastors and lay leaders who take Bible study seriously and who offer substantial Bible studies in their parish. Many people heard the stories of Daniel in the den of lions and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace in their Sunday School years, but while these stories are interesting to children, they become much richer when seen in the historical setting and context of the Book of Daniel itself. These stories are not just occasions for children to color and paste, and do some role playing; they also speak an important word to us in our time as we struggle with what it means to live as Christians in a pagan culture where we are encouraged and tempted to compromise our faith on a daily basis, and where Christian faith is often reduced to "feeling good or being happy." As we ponder the place of our nation in the larger picture of our world, Daniel speaks to all of these issues and more.

I would encourage you to offer an adult Bible study on Daniel, and even to preach from some of its texts. Daniel is not as difficult to understand as some people think, given the proper tools and methodology. This commentary would give you a good foundation for your preparation, and in the process you would enable your people to

move on towards the year 2000 with the hope and confidence born of new insights from one of our most misused books of the Bible.

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**AFTER THE APOSTLES: CHRISTIANITY IN THE SECOND CENTURY**, by Walter H. Wagner. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994. Pp. 296. \$22.95 (paper).

The basic question that any historian has to answer before undertaking historical research is "Why?" Why is this important? Why should anyone care about people who lived, in some cases, many years ago? For church historians, there are more questions: Why is this relevant to the faith of modern Christians? Why is this important for the life of the believing community? Wagner understands this, and answers the question clearly and directly:

Frankly, [the second century] was a messy century. I think that its very messiness is particularly helpful to us for several reasons. First, the churning and instability allow us to see behind the later formulations and apparent certainties of what came to be called Christian orthodoxy and its relationships to political-social institutions. The options and the persons who struggled with them may be seen and understood more clearly as we are able to feel their passionate concerns more fully. Second, by examining the interrelationships of culture, a community's issues, and the engagements of key leaders and teachers, we may comprehend the unhinging and recombining of assumptions and expectations in our own time. Finally, by considering the second century's wealth of ideas, leaders, and initiatives, we may discern ways to join creatively with tradition as we prepare to move into another century. (viii)

As a former teacher, Wagner realizes that the "messiness" of the second century makes it difficult for readers not familiar with the complicated history of the era to jump into primary texts. He spends the first quarter of the book carefully and clearly

laying the groundwork for the discussion to follow. He sketches out what we know of the political and intellectual history of the era, and shows how Christians, Jews, and pagans were responding to the challenges and concerns of the world around them. He chooses five questions that were particularly urgent for Christians in the second century (and today): Who created the world, and what is the nature of that creation, and of the relationship between Creator and creation? What does it mean to be human? Who was Jesus? What is the church? What is the relationship between Christians and the larger society? He explores these questions as questions, showing the variety of viewpoints possible and the way that the pagans and the Jews had tried to answer them.

The most interesting part of this book is the last third, where Wagner takes five specific Christian leaders of the second century and shows how each of them answered these questions. The leaders he chooses are Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Irenaeus of Lyons. The fact that these five men were all recognized Christian leaders shows the intellectual turbulence of the second century. Clement was in many ways close to Gnosticism. Tertullian left the "orthodox" church and became a Montanist. Justin's understanding of Jesus would later have been called Arianism. Yet each of them was working with essentially the same texts and traditions, and three or four of them died for their faith. Each of them was accepted as a teacher by the Christians who followed them and, despite their disagreements, contributed to the development of Christian orthodoxy.

The differences between them have not gone away in the intervening years. They are still in the background of many issues and disagreements in the modern world. For example, western Christianity holds, with Tertullian, that to be human means to be sinful, fundamentally unable to choose the good, and that only decisive action by God can change this. American culture, on the other hand, holds, with Clement (and perhaps Justin), that humans can choose the good through knowledge (e.g., if people know the dangers of smoking, they

won't smoke). In the spiritual realm, this has led to the Gnostic revival of the New Age movement. In the public realm, it has led to educational campaigns on everything from drinking and driving to safe sex. How does the Church interact with this culture? How do we talk about these underlying issues? How do we talk to, and about, other Christians who have decided (consciously or not) that Tertullian was wrong?

It is a strength of Wagner's writing that while he does not explicitly raise any modern issues, his description of those of the second century is so clear that modern analogies are easy to discern. Those in the paragraph above are only a few of the ones that occurred to me spontaneously in reading this book. It is another strength that he is not afraid to include figures as controversial as Tertullian and Clement, and to give their ideas a respectful hearing. The format is clear, the writing is lucid, and the book is very understandable and thought-provoking. Anyone who is interested in the intellectual underpinnings of Christianity would enjoy reading and reflecting on this book.

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**POSSESSED BY GOD: A NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY OF SANCTIFICATION AND HOLINESS**, by David Peterson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995. Pp. 191.

As the inaugural volume of the *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, David Peterson's work excels in driving the reader deeper into the word. One needs an open Bible and dexterous hands to follow him as he weaves careful exegesis into a convincing argument for definitive sanctification. Beginning with a broad survey of the character of God in the Old Testament, moving through several passages in the Gospels, and finally settling into the Epistles, Peterson shows that holiness is the result of God's initiative, rather than human effort.

Instead of endorsing the popular notion

that sanctification is “the process of moral and spiritual transformation following conversion,” Peterson treats the theme as an enterprise that God originates and sustains (27). He insists that holiness is “a status or condition which God imparts to those whom he chooses to bring into a special relationship with himself through covenant and redemption” (23). Just as God rescued Israel from Egypt and Babylon, so also he effected the redemption of sinners through the work of Jesus Christ. These were acts that established a new reality of having been set apart. Peterson cites Exodus 19-20 and John 17 as examples of how God alone has the power to sanctify. Meanwhile, Hebrews 10:10 and 1 Corinthians (1:2, 30; 6:11) demonstrate that it is God’s will to do just that—to draw the unworthy close for a share in his holiness. Grace alone creates the relationship.

More problematic is the consideration of how this relationship is sustained. In the Old Covenant, elaborate rituals were necessary to maintain God’s holiness before the Israelites. Peterson notes that Moses and Aaron were punished severely for the one occasion where they failed to bear witness to God’s continuous, sanctifying presence (Numbers 20:12). This demonstrates the authority of the law that characterizes the Old Covenant. Yet for Christians, holiness is upheld by the “ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit and the trust that he gives in the finished work of Christ” (24). The authority of the Holy Spirit is emphasized, receiving credit for enabling “those who hear the gospel to understand, to believe and to be formed into one body in Christ” (58). Peterson notes that it is the gospel that builds up the church and keeps its members in faith. He cites Paul’s farewell speech in Acts 20:17-35 as an example of how the holiness of the church is maintained by the message of grace. Word and Spirit work together to sustain the condition of sanctification.

Naturally, this state in which believers find themselves has practical consequences. Peterson writes, “sanctification is about being possessed by God and expressing that distinctive and exclusive relationship by the way we live” (48). Yet defenders of progressive sanctification may go astray at this point. In constructing

a ladder upon which people may climb or slip, such interpreters create “unrealistic expectations” which can give rise to “guilt and despair” (70). In a chapter entitled “Pursuing Holiness,” Peterson examines the context of Hebrews 12:14. He concludes that the call is not to achieve peace and sanctification by one’s own works, but to “realize the practical benefits of what has been made available...in Christ” (74). Rephrased in the words of W. L. Lane, “Christians must not become indifferent to the gifts they possess through the gospel.”

Sanctification does lead to change and transformation. Peterson uses Romans 6-8 to show that for Paul, definitive sanctification includes the transfer from one age to the next. The absolute terms of being “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11), however, must be understood in their eschatological context. Complete freedom from sin will come only on the last day. In the meantime, Christians live in the tension of the “now” but the “not yet,” drawing strength for godly living from both “the hope of the physical resurrection” and the “certainty, that on the cross, sin’s penalty was paid” (99-100). The call is to live a life of repentance, putting to death those things that the Lord has already condemned, while waiting in trust for the Spirit “to continue and complete his great work of glorification” (126). Peterson seems to make a distinction between a practical holiness that depends upon repentance and an ultimate holiness (glorification before Christ) that depends upon grace. Both kinds require the renewing activity of the Spirit. As it stands, Christians “must be content here and now to share visibly in the pattern of Christ’s death rather than in the pattern of his glory” (114).

As a Lutheran pastor, I found it easy to be sympathetic to this work. Peterson reminds us that our essential identity and ultimate security lie in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This offers hope in a world that is dominated by the law. His work gives encouragement to preach the gospel, in and out of season. At the same time, I would like to see this biblical theology expanded to include a treatment of the sacraments. Peterson makes only mi-

nor references to baptism and draws no connections to Holy Communion. His remark that "conversion and water baptism are often separated in Christian experience," and qualification about "genuine" initiation into Christ seem to lead us back into the morass of needing proof of progress in holiness. Does baptism deliver the promises and responsibilities of sanctification or not? Peterson leaves the issue open to interpretation.

This book requires a thorough, disciplined reading. Peterson's vast number of references to scripture and modern authors reaches beyond the point of saturation. One seems forced to bring in one's own doctrinal commitments in order to simplify the situation. Yet the challenge is to be open to the broader range of biblical sources on the theme. In this manner, Peterson's work can be of great assistance to Christians in their service to the word.

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**RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE: A DILEMMA FOR DEMOCRACY**, by Ronald F. Thiemann. Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1996. Pp. 200. \$17.95 (paper).

Ronald Thiemann seeks to show how religion may not (only) "pose a dilemma, but also provide a source of renewal for American public life" (151). That it is a dilemma has become increasingly clear. Thiemann, dean at Harvard Divinity School, focuses on recent Supreme Court decisions and shows the court to be divided between three positions: (1) strict separation unless religious expression serves a "clear secular purpose"; (2) strict neutrality (not just among religions but between religion and non-religion); and (3) symbolic accommodation (as in presidential thanksgiving proclamations, chaplains in the military and the legislature, and the like). He notes that the confusion may be

related to the two religion clauses in the constitution itself. The nonestablishment clause read by itself would permit no governmental assistance to religion, while the free exercise clause may seem to support some measure of accommodation.

Thiemann offers an historical observation, which helps the reader see why this dilemma presses upon us with such force today. While not legally established, protestant Christianity "enjoyed" a kind of cultural establishment yielding a "nonchristological theism," which sustained a common civic piety. As religious pluralism and secularism increased, this American civil religion lost its ability to shape civic virtue. And thus we come to the "naked public square," lamented on both the left (e.g., William Dean) and the right (e.g., Robert Benne). This development exposed the failure on the part of this nation's founders "to articulate a vision by which civic virtue could be nurtured in a truly diverse population" (33).

So, what is to be done? Thiemann finds three common strategies inadequate: "appeals to an imagined moral consensus provided by our historic civic piety, attempts to remove religion altogether from public life and efforts to divide personal religious commitments from public decision making" (37). He contends that "the slogan 'separation of church and state' impedes our understanding of the proper role of religion in American public life and...must be basically reconceived and perhaps even abandoned" (43). The task of redefinition will include the notions of the "private" ("church" not being sufficient to refer to the varieties of religious practice, and religious practice itself being understood as opening out to the public) and the "public" (where multinational corporations, for example, call for consideration as much as the government).

Noting that James Madison offers a theological argument for his assertion of the free exercise of religion (to be guided by conscience in matters of religion is to fulfill one's duty toward the Creator), Thiemann moves to consider how communities of faith may serve the debate regarding the public good. He does make clear that he is not arguing "that the core values of democracy can only be derived from a theological

argument" (150). Drawing on Thomas Nagel's discussion of "criteria of publicity," Thiemann specifies three "norms of plausibility" which citizens should use in evaluating arguments in the public domain. These are: (1) public accessibility (by which premises are open to public scrutiny); (2) mutual respect (involving not merely toleration, but acknowledging the moral agency of those with whom one disagrees); and (3) moral integrity (consistency of speech and between speech and action, integrity of principle, and the role of dissent).

Thiemann builds his proposal on a revised conception of political liberalism, positioned between classical modern liberalism and sectarian communitarianism. In this view one does not claim universally shared premises, but one also avoids simply appealing to one's own private beliefs. In the exercise instead of "a common critical rationality" (Nagel), citizens will find it possible to disagree rationally, escaping the "Cartesian anxiety" that requires absolute certainty and recognizing in reasoning the role of judgment as something other than private faith. Indeed Thiemann asks us to see that belief itself is neither essentially private nor irrational but represents basic communal orienting convictions, which "do not differ in kind or in function from the fundamental commitments that orient the lives of nonreligious persons" (155). Religious beliefs are not, then, truly incorrigible. Thiemann's own example is not trivial: the resurrection (132-3).

Thiemann is thus calling for us to see that core values can "be derived from a particular comprehensive scheme and yet be inclusive of the beliefs of those who do not share that scheme" (150). The fundamental values of the American republic are freedom, equality, and mutual respect. Looking at such a matter as the proposal that universality should be a major goal of health care coverage, Thiemann suggests that the Christian tradition offers the parable of the Good Samaritan, which connects with the notions of fairness and concern for the vulnerable inherent in the democratic values of equality and mutual respect.

Returning to his central example of the

Supreme Court, Thiemann concludes that care needs to be given to protect the right of religious freedom, that religious traditions need to be treated equally (but this does not necessitate a "clear secular purpose"), and that the particular vulnerability of minority voices needs to be recognized.

I am enlightened and encouraged by Thiemann's proposal. Pastors will recognize that he has identified a sphere of neuralgic issues confronting their people as citizens. The approach he suggests is promising. Additional questions will of course arise, if the approach is followed. In particular, we would be helped by a fuller statement of how recognizing the historical development of a religious community's faith moves through the allowing for some degree of change or correction of beliefs ("even fundamentalist Christians," 133) to the view that "a commitment to pluralism is fully compatible with a robust assertion of the truth of one's own beliefs" (164). This question has a practical side, since Thiemann recognizes that public accessibility can only be encouraged and not "demanded" in a society that protects free speech as a fundamental right" (136). And it has a theological side. Thiemann states that "the warrants" for his position "are derived not from a strategy of liberal accommodation to the world but from the foundational sources of Christianity itself" (163). He adds: "Moreover, since I recognize that my own faith is the gift of a gracious God, I cannot limit God's graciousness to others simply because I have come to believe in God through the person of Jesus Christ. I do not claim to *know* with certainty that there are many equally true paths to God; therefore, I do not propose a theological *theory* of pluralism. But I cannot consistently, given my Christian convictions, deny that possibility" (163). Does that get us all the way to the next sentence, "Therefore I must affirm theologically both the reality and the gift of religious diversity"?

It is surely a consistent expression of Thiemann's position that he draws insight for the public realm from the faith of his community. The burden of this book is not to help Christians do that, formally or materially. I hope that diverse Ameri-

can pilgrims will walk in the direction Thiemann indicates. And I hope he will offer specific help to Christians on that public thoroughfare.

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**WRESTLING WITH DEPRESSION: A SPIRITUAL GUIDE TO RECLAIMING LIFE**, by William and Lucy Hulme. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995. Pp. 120 (paper).

It has been estimated that 17 million Americans experience clinical depression each year, and that up to 25% of nursing home residents are depressed. Because pastors have the first, and often most personal and prolonged, professional involvement with these suffering people it is incumbent upon us to learn all we can about clinical depression and its treatment. If you are open to such learning, read what Bill and Lucy Hulme have written. I have read a lot about depression but I have seen nothing that more powerfully combines the personal and the professional and which so meaningfully addresses the agony of depression from the perspective of both the afflicted person and the affected spouse.

After 40 years of studying and teaching pastoral care, Dr. Hulme experienced one of the worst depressions ever treated at the University of Minnesota Hospital where he was a patient for two and a half months. It was a terrifying time for him and his family. When I visited him in the hospital and commented that he was going through a dark night of the soul, Bill replied, "If it were only a night I could endure it. This is not a night, it is eternal and there is no way out." In *Wrestling with Depression*, Bill describes his agony in concrete and vivid detail. As the narrative unfolds we move back and forth between Bill's and Lucy's stories and learn first-hand of the frustration and perplexity depression presents to a loving spouse whose attempts to be helpful are often spurned and sometimes met with hostility.

Empathetic readers will learn that clini-

cal depression is a physical illness dramatically different from the blue moods and down days that come to all of us. It is not something that we or others can talk ourselves out of. Talk therapy can be helpful and scripture and prayer can be a blessing but, as with physical illnesses, these are not all, or even the most important, of God's therapeutic gifts. Antidepressant medications are the answer for many, but even these were insufficient for Bill. When all else failed, Bill received electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). After nine shock treatments over a three-week period Bill and his psychiatrist realized that he was well again and the treatments were stopped. He describes his recovery as "my resurrection" and says:

My experience was like an instantaneous healing, the kind with which we associate the word *miracle*. It was as though I had come from death to life, from consciously sleepless to where I could sleep. Others would tell me that I had slept, but in my conscious awareness, I thought I had not slept for two and one-half months. I went from not eating to actually feeling hungry. After weeks of withdrawal from all activities on the unit, I began to participate. I recall playing Yahtzee with the recreational therapist and a couple of other patients and actually enjoying it...

During my deepest depression I had no faith. Yet I strongly believe that had I died in my sense of damnation, I would have been saved. God had hold of me, even though I had no subjective awareness of this. Salvation is by grace, *sola gratia*, through faith if one is capable of it, without faith if one is not. Grace, as gift, puts all the emphasis on God, where it had to be in my condition....

Based on my experience, there is no reason to fear shock treatments or to have any sense of shame for having taken them. Those who tell about negative experiences with shock treatments usually base their opinions on what happened some time ago. There has been much improvement in shock treatments since then. ECT has had a resurgence in recent years because of the improvements and also because it works effectively for the great majority of people....

ECT was a godsend for me and may well have saved my life. Some people have

experienced memory loss due to these treatments, but usually because they received more than the normal six to nine treatments. In my case, I experienced no memory loss and can even remember everything about the treatments except for the brief time when I was unconscious from the sedation. (43, 45, 74)

As Bill's words indicate, this little volume, in spite of its candid recounting of misery, is a very hopeful, and in the end, joyful book. Bill fully recovered and even though suffering from chronic leukemia that eventually took his life, never again experienced clinical depression. His vital witness now lives on and as the story and insights of this book are shared, it offers hope of recovery and "resurrection" for others who, like Bill, in their depressions believe that the night is endless and that there is no way out of it.

In several subsections titled "Lucy's Story" or "Lucy Speaks" we learn in vivid, concrete detail of the impact of depression on spouse and family. Lucy's first-hand testimony also abounds in both pain and hope and provides an essential perspective on depression that is often ignored or minimized by writers who focus almost exclusively on the patient. For insight, healing, strengthening of ministry and the joy of a great true story I encourage every pastor and person who ever has, or ever will have, anything to do with depression to read this book.

When you have read it you may wish to take up some of the suggestions "for further reading" listed in the annotated bibliography. I have read Martha Manning's *Undercurrents* and William Styron's *Darkness Visible* and join Bill and Lucy in commending them to you.

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**THE CLOISTER WALK**, by Kathleen Norris. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996. Pp. 384. \$23.95.

Kathleen Norris, the New Yorker who went west to Lemmon, South Dakota, with

her husband for a brief stay ended up living there. Coming from a traditional protestant background which included a twenty-year vacation from the church, she was attracted to Benedictine monasticism and became an oblate of Assumption Abbey in North Dakota. Her first book, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, won wide acclaim and was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for many weeks. It is also "must reading" for any new residents of the Dakotas, especially clergy. *The Cloister Walk* is a sequel to *Dakota*, and is the result of her two extended residencies (eighteen months) at St. John's Benedictine Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, as a resident scholar of the Ecumenical Institute located there.

Upon leaving the monastery she began to feel herself transformed, and the daily events of her life on the Great Plains—from her morning walk to her going to sleep at night—gradually took on new meaning. In the monastery time slowed down, offering a new perspective on community, family, and small-town life. By coming to understand the Benedictine practice of celibacy, she felt her own marriage enriched; through the communal reading aloud of the psalms every day, her notion of the ancient oral tradition of poetry came to life; even the mundane task of laundry took on new meaning through the lens of Benedictine ritual. Indeed, she insists that it was the ritual of the daily hours (which she understands as poetry) which returned her to the church which heretofore had offered her only arid prose. In this book she takes us through a liturgical year as she experienced it both within the monastery and outside it. She shows us, from the perspective of someone who is both insider and outsider, how immersion in the cloistered world—its liturgy, its rituals, its sense of community—can impart meaning to everyday events and deepen one's secular life. Her sense of humor, keen observation, wry wit, and empathy with human nature transform the monastery from a caricature of archaic irrelevance to an accessible window on the church and society today. Just a few vignettes must suffice from her storehouse of observations.

Monasteries are full of real people, and considering the tensions in any family be-



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tween structure and freedom, diversity and unity, it takes a great deal of tolerance and humor to maintain equilibrium. But the community is not an end in itself. It exists for the praise of God and a shared vision of the coming reign of God, even though some of its members may be "borderline" and "surpassingly strange."

What is especially interesting to a Lutheran is her high appreciation for the Liturgy and the discipline of form and the Daily Office, which she compares with poetry. It was the Liturgy and especially the Psalms which beckoned Norris back to the church. At St. John's the Psalms are sung daily at Morning, Noon, and Evening Prayer, completing the entire book once each month. That means a monk there will have recited all the psalms twelve times each year. And that means all 150 (*The Lutheran Book of Worship* contains only one hundred twenty-two). Norris has interesting observations on the so-called imprecatory psalms, "rehabilitating" them in terms of their context and spiritual meaning. She sees a selective reading of the psalms as reflecting American "optimism and denial," a kind of politically correct filtering of lament and pain. She says that when you go to church several times a day there is no way you can "do it right each time." You wear casual clothes and often your thoughts wander, but it's just then that the great "Book of Praise" gets you through all moods. "You may feel like hell but you sing anyway."

Her section on "Good Old Sin" levels criticism at the polite verbiage of modern-day counseling which speaks of guilt feelings rather than acknowledging real guilt. At the basis of all sin is pride, a denial of God. The occasion for her discourse on sin is the liturgical observance of the desert fathers, especially the monk Evagrius, who was the first to codify the monastic concept of sin as an aberration of creation rather than excuse it as being merely a part of human nature. Her interpretation of the virgin martyrs is just one example of the fresh way in which she comes at church history. Rather than dismiss hagiography with its multitude of improbable miracles, she looks behind the fanciful stories to find the key to what was really being conveyed

through these metaphors. She points out that popular devotion to saints has often been a kind of shadow religion, more or less ignored by the official church. The virgin martyrs reveal a dimension of the church usually ignored by the mostly male historians; and the idealization of celibacy was far more complex than a mere rejection of sexuality.

Norris' style is engaging and pointed. About apocalypse she writes: "Apocalypse takes us far beyond the bounds of language and custom. If you've ever experienced the strangeness of being a healthy person in an Intensive Care Unit...then you have experienced apocalypse" (214). With this she begins her interpretation of the Revelation of St. John, which is best heard rather than read, as it was initially a vision. John was reinterpreting what he had been given. Biblical metaphors—dragon, lamb, har-

lots, bride—come to new life in John's imagination, and so we also must continue to explore the metaphors like mustard seed and yeast to get at the core of the message.

All this is only a sampler of new insights on nearly every page. The last half of the book takes her back to Lemmon, South Dakota, and how she applied her monastic experiences to life in a small town on the treeless, arid, windy prairie. If you don't have the time to read many books, you can't go wrong by reading Kathleen Norris. With theology you'll get homespun humor, good stories, psychological insights, everyday heroism, and some useful windows into monastic life today and its parallels with every Christian's life.

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