

Reviews



MATTHEW AND EMPIRE: INITIAL EXPLORATIONS, by Warren Carter. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001. Pp. 249. \$25.00 (paper).

In *Matthew and Empire*, Warren Carter makes the case for the gospel of Matthew as a narrative of resistance that “assumes [the] experience of Roman imperial power on every page” (35) and levels both theological and social challenges to that all too real exercise of power in the lives of the gospel’s first readers. Writing in an engaging and accessible style, Carter argues—counter to nearly a century of Matthean scholarship—that it is not the relationship between Matthew’s community and the post-70 synagogue that forms the dominant social backdrop for Matthew’s story of Jesus. Instead, the primary external social reality for this group of early Christians in Antioch is Roman imperialism, and the message of the gospel is that salvation comes not through Roman gods or their imperial agents, but rather through Jesus Christ.

The book begins with three chapters describing the Roman imperial system, with its reliance on such things as military muscle, taxation, a local retainer class of collaborators in the provinces, and a theology that ascribes divine agency to the emperors. In this social context, Matthew tells a story in bold and direct conflict with the stories that Rome tells.

The conflict between world-defining stories occurs on two levels. First, Matthew presents a theological challenge to imperialism’s claims: the God of Israel (not Jupiter) is sovereign and through his agent, Jesus (not the emperor), the one true God enacts sovereignty, presence, agency, and societal

well-being. Carter quotes first-century sources that ascribe each of these attributes or actions to Roman emperors, and then demonstrates from the text of Matthew that what elsewhere is attributed to the emperors, in the gospel is attributed to Jesus. Matthew’s christology, then, is a direct attack on Roman imperial theology.

In addition to a theological challenge, Matthew offers a social challenge to Rome. To encapsulate the point here, Carter returns often to a saying of Jesus that appears in all three Synoptic Gospels: “But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant...’” (Matt 20:25-26). The society of those who follow Jesus is ordered on values fundamentally at odds with Rome’s hierarchical and authoritarian structure. Salvation, as Matthew understands it, is not only religious and moral, but also profoundly political. Carter is attempting here to offer a corrective to readings of Jesus as a non-political messiah. The fact that Jesus did not initiate or advocate the armed overthrow of the Roman government does not mean that he or his message were unconcerned with social and political realities or acquiescent to Roman rule.

The third section of the book includes four exegetical studies to illustrate in depth the manner in which the evangelist engages the powers of Rome as he tells the story of Jesus. The most illuminating of these studies focuses on the little story unique to Matthew of Peter, Jesus, and a fish that has a coin in its mouth to be used for the temple tax (Matt 17:24-27). After A.D. 70, Rome

continued to collect the tax but used it for the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. Carter understands the fish story to be an example of humor employed to resist the message that Rome is sovereign over anything. God provides both the fish and the coin with which to pay the tax, as God provides rain upon the just and the unjust, as parents provide fish rather than a snake when their children are hungry. "The act of paying gives the empire what it demands but not on its terms. Fish and tax exist in God's greater sovereignty or reign. God laughs at 'the kings of the earth' by refusing to let their claim of domination, signified by the tax, go uncontested" (142).

At one point, Carter refers to his method as "imperial-critical" (76). It is an accurate description of the method and points to my only disappointment with the book. At times *Matthew and Empire* reads as if its author's imperial-critical lens has magnified anti-imperial motifs so powerfully that everything else in the gospel is reduced to insignificant blur and backdrop. *Matthew and Empire* rewards time spent with it. Carter has contributed much to the study of Matthew by cataloguing the striking challenges to Rome implicit in the rhetoric of the gospel. Yet surely it cannot be the case that Matthew was only in conversation with Roman imperialism and not also in conversation with post-70 synagogue Judaism. Carter does not try to argue such a thing, yet the book often leaves such an impression. In his commentary on the gospel, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), Carter himself reads Matthew not only in relation to the Roman empire but also in relation to the synagogue. Unfortunately, one may read *Matthew and Empire* and receive almost no hint, save a comment in the introduction, that Matthew was also writing in dialogue with the Jewish traditions of his time and place.

Carter's concluding chapter demonstrates that he is a theologian concerned for the church as well as an exegete. Here Carter discusses implications of Matthew's gospel

for the modern practice of Christianity, noting his theological and social challenges to imperialisms then and now, and he does so without being limited to the standard antiestablishment glossary of solidarity, inclusivity, and the like. "One of the functions of Matthew's Gospel is to help its audience evaluate its world and discern the nature and impact of their societal structures and the exercise of power" (173). Carter concludes *Matthew and Empire* by pointing to ways that the gospel continues to help its current audiences accomplish just such evaluation and discernment.

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REVELATION AND THE END OF ALL THINGS, by Craig R. Koester. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001. Pp. 209. \$16.00 (paper).

The book of Revelation has prompted an ebb and flow of curiosity and fascination throughout the history of Christianity. We seem to be in the midst of a rising tide at the moment for several reasons, including the incredible sales success of the *Left Behind* series of novels about the end times, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. One survey indicates that almost ten percent of American adults have read at least one of the *Left Behind* books. *Desecration*, the ninth volume in the series, was the best selling fiction book of 2001 in the United States, the first year since 1994 that John Grisham has not held that spot. The *Left Behind* books have moved beyond their predictable audience to become a widespread popular culture phenomenon.

A tradition moving from the teachings of J. N. Darby in the 1830s, to the Scofield Reference Bible, to the 1970s evangelical film *A Thief in the Night*, to Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and now including the *Left Behind* books, has persuaded a majority of conservative Christians in the United States to embrace a belief system that is of-

ten called “premillennial dispensationalism.” Many mainline Christians believe it as well, sometimes because they have never heard any alternative perspectives. In its dominant expression, premillennial dispensationalism expects a Rapture of true Christians, followed by a seven-year Tribulation, leading to the Glorious Appearing of Jesus Christ and the defeat of Satan, initiating the Millennium, a thousand years of peace on earth. These are expected to be literal events at the end of history, and many Christians are searching for signs that this end-time scenario is about to commence. Much of the scenario is built upon a particular reading of the book of Revelation.

In this context, Craig Koester, professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, has written a very helpful resource for considering other views. *Revelation and the End of All Things* is essentially a commentary on the book of Revelation. Although based on solid scholarship, it is written more for a general audience than for academic specialists. Koester’s preface indicates that the book grew “out of years of teaching courses on Revelation to seminary students, pastors, and congregational groups” (xi). He avoids unnecessary jargon, explains concepts that might be unfamiliar to general readers, and makes limited use of citations and footnotes. In his writing style one can imagine Koester conversing with ministers, students, and interested laity.

The opening chapter is especially important, because Koester directly addresses the cultural context mentioned above. He first provides a twenty-page sample of the great variety of interpretations of Revelation throughout Christian history, including the views of Luther, the Branch Davidians at Waco, and more. The samples represent three major approaches to reading Revelation: (1) “a message about the future of the world,” a coded prediction of future events; (2) a timeless message for every generation about the conflict between good and evil in all of our lives; and (3) “visions concerning events that are now in the past,” relating es-

pecially to the persecutions and challenges of early Christianity.

In the remainder of the opening chapter, Koester then comments directly on premillennial dispensationalism and outlines a number of reasons why he finds it problematic. His personal position is that “Revelation is not a coded collection of secrets that will finally become intelligible at the end of time, for from the beginning it has been an open book that was designed to communicate with Christians living on earth” (40). Koester also highlights mainline Christianity’s striking silence about Revelation, but he argues that Revelation’s imagery has nonetheless influenced Christians through music. “Mainline Christians might not read Revelation,” he writes, “but they sing it all the time” (33).

The main body of the book then works through Revelation, not verse by verse but section by section, providing extensive background information about historical and literary context and summarizing the overarching flow of thought. Koester emphasizes that Revelation does not provide a linear chronological narrative, but rather, overlapping cycles of visions. For readers who simply find Revelation confusing, Koester’s discussions provide a helpful roadmap.

Two crucial, related issues of interpretation emerge in this consideration of Revelation, one directly addressed by Koester, and the other only partially so. The first issue is whether Revelation should be read literally or symbolically. Koester effectively argues that Revelation paraphrases Old Testament passages but never quotes them verbatim, thus undercutting a mechanistic use of texts for literal predictions. He also discusses Revelation’s use of “word pictures to describe things that do not neatly fit within the confines of space and time” (181). To speculate about whether the “door to the abyss” is located in the northern or southern hemisphere misses the point, and references to an hour or a thousand years are references to brief or long-lasting phenomena, not precise chronological calculations.

Dispensationalists, Koester says, often confuse the literal and the symbolic.

The other issue concerns reading the Bible in context. Koester's entire volume is dedicated to understanding Revelation contextually, i.e., understanding to whom it was written, how its first readers would have understood it, and seeing the message of Revelation as a whole rather than considering verses in isolation. Mainline Christians assume that the value of this approach is self-evident. Yet we must acknowledge that many advocates of dispensationalist views do not share this assumption. If, according to their beliefs, the Bible was verbally inspired, word for word, literally, by God, the Bible presents a seamless narrative written by one ultimate author, and the importance of historical context diminishes. Thus, from this perspective, there is nothing illegitimate about bringing together single verses from throughout the Old and New Testaments to build a prediction of the future. The contest in understanding Revelation is not only about symbolic and literal interpretations, but also about whether it is important to read biblical passages in context.

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FEMINIST THEOLOGIES FOR A POST-MODERN CHURCH: DIVERSITY, COMMUNITY, AND SCRIPTURE, by Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd; American University Studies, Series VII – Theology and Religion, Vol. 219. New York: Peter Lang, 2002. Pp. 252. \$29.95 (paper).

This timely book surveys the work of four feminist theologians and compares, in the second half of the book, the United Church of Canada's theological methods utilized in various documents and decisions regarding the issues of homosexual relationships and the ordination of lesbian and gay clergy. The United Church of Canada discussed these and other issues around sexuality from the 1960s through the 1980s,

and the resolutions on homosexual relationships and the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy were voted on and finalized in 1988. The author surveys the history and theology of these various documents in light of the postmodern critique of modern, liberal, scientific authority, and addresses the issues of the use of Scripture and Christian tradition, biblical authority and revelation, community and diversity, and accountability. MacKenzie Shepherd offers surprises, challenges, and fresh insights in this lively, well-articulated theological treatment of historical/organizational processes. For example, she describes the arguments offered in discussions about homosexual relationships and ordination of lesbian and gay clergy, and then notes that in the 1960s the very same types of arguments were utilized to discuss the proposed ordination of women. This book may become an excellent resource in informing current debates in U.S. mainline denominations on homosexuality issues so that, for many aspects of these church-wide processes, we don't have to reinvent the wheel.

The author states that "Many of us who are not well versed in the latest historical-critical conclusions feel inadequate in our use of scriptures. As Christian theologians and pastors, however, (we know that) scripture is integral to our theologies and ministries" (4). She also claims that "Modern suspicion of subjective experience, and assumptions that experts can more accurately describe the identities and needs of those marginalized...[and modern] emphasis upon the empirical scientific method has also granted authority to the biblical interpretations of 'impartial' scholars, rather than faith communities" (7).

MacKenzie Shepherd compares and contrasts four liberation/feminist theologies and describes each theologian's critique of modernity, liberalism, and colonialism. She names the four as critical-modern (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza), post-structural (Mary McClintock Fulkerson), postcolonial (Kwok Pui-Lan), and post-liberal (Kathryn Tanner). "Modernity" is

defined as “favoring rational or scientific approaches that produce universally valid, verifiable conclusions”; “liberal,” meaning “marked by the social, political and intellectual rights and freedoms of the individual”; and “post-colonialism” is defined as “critiquing systems of power that subjugate and colonize a people.” (These definitions are from the helpful glossary of terms, 236-238.)

The author notes how these four theologians have built on each other’s work, and that all four theologians share a critique of the modern era’s scientific approach that distorts Christian theology. The dualisms of “mind/body, fact/value...divine order [being] separate from the natural order...and [t]raditional rules about the sovereignty of God and human agency are subverted. They can no longer be held together; belief in one can only be affirmed at the expense of the other” (110).

Pastors and theologians who read this book will receive a concise overview of most major theological, biblical criticism, and philosophical developments of the past twenty to twenty-five years. After the clearly outlined introduction of these newer terminologies, the reader is made more familiar with the use of these perspectives at the grassroots level for many “minority” congregations. For example, Kathryn Tanner utilizes an “internal critique” within mainstream Christianity in the United States, calling upon her own denominational tradition of faithful reading of the “plain sense” of Scripture, “affirming the innate power and centrality of scripture” (123) to inform and enlighten each Christian community. Also included in the definition of minority congregational groups are those that are described in Mary McClintock Fulkerson’s research on Appalachian Pentecostal women, women of Jehovah’s Witness groups, and Presbyterian housewives. It is refreshing, and affirming of my own church leadership experience, to realize (as described in Kathryn Tanner’s “Theories of Culture”) that each individual congregation of any denomination can have a “cul-

ture” or group personality, or God-given gifts that are unique; and that this group may worship and function very differently from the ways that a “typical” congregation in this denomination may be described. Via the attention paid by each theologian to various Christian communities who perceive themselves as *not* part of the mainstream, we are encouraged to reconsider how we might identify with those who are marginalized from our modern, liberal Christian communities. MacKenzie Shepherd’s pastoral experience and theological study produce practical fruit in this work, especially when she features “real life” faith communities.

Instead of becoming “paralyzed by postmodern relativism,” the author’s descriptions of the postmodern movement’s thinking lead us to interacting with the reality of our multicultural, multi-generational, multi-identified world. Her compassion for people who may have been left out of and/or impacted by major church body decisions is revealed in her treatments of “Accountability and Authoritative Criteria” (225-232). Her statement “As we seek to live into grace, our relationship with God entices us to yearn for healing relationships” (225) focuses the last chapter’s attention on our accountabilities to the wider body of Christ, to a denomination’s canonical system and its Christian traditions, and to the earth and its marginalized peoples.

Mackenzie Shepherd’s survey of the four theologians, and the analysis of the application of these theologies to her own denomination’s process regarding a challenging issue, allows us to view these arenas of conflict and care-full learning in our faith communities from new and creative perspectives.

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REDEMPTIVE CHANGE: ATONEMENT AND THE CHRISTIAN CURE OF THE SOUL, by R. R. Reno. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002. Pp. 267. \$28.00 (paper).

Reno's self-acknowledged aim in writing this work is to "assess the Christian view of personal change and to do so in comparison to modern humanism, not to make dogmatic proposals of my own" (196). At this level he succeeds, but we learn about this aim only in the final chapter of the book. The doctrine upon which his assessment turns is the atonement, although most of the study assesses modern humanism as represented by Rousseau, Hume, and Kant. As a pastoral theologian, I am not in a position to critique Reno's interpretations of these philosophers, but note that he admits, for example, that his approach to interpreting Kant may be somewhat removed from the standard interpretations (125). Even so, Reno's argument is clear and easy to follow for those who don't possess the requisite background in philosophy.

Reno begins with the following questions: "How can anything *be* against the forces of change? Where are permanence and stability in the endless flux of events? What abides and has the ability to endure against the erosive power of time?" (1). A desire for personal change also entails the possibility of self-destruction or dissolution. How, then, can change be redemptive? Reno's answer to that question is: "I must be able to affirm that I am consequential and continuous in change" (6). Everything about whether or not change is redemptive is keyed to personal identity, and yet Reno confesses that he does not address the question of what constitutes personal identity. One of his main theses, which is developed only near the conclusion of this study, is:

Where modern humanism fails through self-contradiction, Christianity succeeds. Christianity avoids contradiction because of the premise that Jesus is "for us" as incorporative power. This premise allows for an account of substitutionary atone-

ment in which the actions of Jesus are imputable to and determinative of persons. Because Christianity succeeds, it can offer something that modern humanism cannot. Christianity can propose a cure of the soul in which we might seek change with some confidence that we are both consequential and continuous. (195)

In order to appreciate how he arrives at this conclusion we need to understand the basic premises of his argument against the modern humanist project.

In the introduction, Reno sets forth three theses for his argument, and recognizes four possible objections, though there are undoubtedly others. A brief summary of the thesis statements is: (1) the role of personal identity in change constitutes the most decisive point of conflict between Christianity and modernity (7); (2) the relationship between personal identity and the highest good that modern humanism endorses cannot affirm that we are both consequential for and continuous across change (9); and (3) only "in Christ" who is "for us" does change become morally meaningful so that personal identity matters in the future (11). Reno identifies the following objections to his argument: (1) he obscures Christian patrimony of modern humanism; (2) he offers a polemical rejection of modern humanism rather than a judicious assessment; (3) the structure of his argument leads the reader to conclude that Christianity is "the dialectical victor" (which is a "hopelessly modern approach"); and (4) the study is outdated since modernity has been eclipsed by postmodernity (13). The nature of his own rhetoric at times gives the impression that he doesn't weigh these objections or the failings and dysfunctions of Christianity carefully in his argument. A single example from the third chapter, where he dissects Hume's criticisms of Christianity, will suffice: "Frothing with therapeutic language, the modern priests of self-realization put demands upon us: 'You must overcome your tendency to feel guilty. Self-acceptance is a much healthier attitude'" (108). The de-

scriptive language brought to mind a rather unfortunate picture of a rabid psychotherapist and I was left wondering if Reno would allow for anything positive from the modern psychotherapies.

In the first chapter, Reno draws a one-to-one correspondence between what he identifies as the two major poles of criticism waged against Christianity by modern humanism, and the writings of Rousseau and Hume. Rousseau's argument is illustrative of the criticism that Christianity "produces a crushing authoritarianism" and is best described as a "horror of dependence," while Hume's argument suggests that "Christianity suffers from a vain and dangerous overreaching that rends the delicate fabric of our humanity," and is best described as a "fear of difference" (23). Reno maintains that there are friendly and unfriendly critics of Christianity; the friendly critic is one who deems certain teachings or ecclesiastical practices are inessential, while the unfriendly critic "has no interest in redeeming Christianity" (27). He too easily dismisses those friendly critics who want to celebrate diversity or who do want to examine the failings of Christianity. In any case, Reno devotes a short chapter to both Rousseau and Hume and then moves on to a more in-depth investigation of Kant in chapters four and five. Kant's argument finally fails because he does not provide an account of atonement.

The final chapter does move us into a theological discussion of atonement in brief, citing Paul and Aquinas among others, but it does not do justice to the various atonement theories. Reno concludes that "against the fear of overreaching that animates modern humanism and its worries about the continuity of personal identity, Christian humanism must affirm the atoning work of Christ" (244). I was left to ponder the question: Why Christian humanism and not simply Christian theology?

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THE NEXT CHRISTENDOM: THE COMING OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY, by Philip Jenkins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Pp. 270. \$28.00 (cloth).

In the nineteenth century, our European forebears in the mission societies of their respective churches sent missionaries far and wide to tell people about Jesus. Some who felt called to go wondered whether or not to go to Africa or America. Both were seen as important mission fields. Some went to Africa, others to America. Both were effective beyond their wildest dreams. How effective, we are only beginning to see.

Because so many of their own people came to this country, soon the missionaries to America were waylaid in their mission, from making Christians into maintaining a folk church of their countrymen who belonged to their tribe. Home mission for Lutherans in this country came to be a tribal project: finding concentrations of Lutherans of one ethnic brand or another and building churches for them. In fact, home mission departments were rumored to have refused requests from eager pastors who wanted to build a congregation in a traditionally non-Lutheran area because there were "no Lutherans there."

In the Southern Hemisphere, however, the missionaries could concentrate on creating new Christians, making disciples whose hearts had been changed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, not by their Northern European genes, which have always been cold to enthusiasms that were not tribal. Philip Jenkins, in his book *The Next Christendom*, argues, to chilling effect, that the future of Christianity lies in the Southern Hemisphere where its worldview fits billions of people immediately, without having to be demythologized, made relevant, or flushed of its transcendent meanings. The message of Jesus Christ, he argues, is exploding throughout the world so quickly that by his demographic projections Christianity will hold a 3 billion to 2 billion lead over Islam by 2050. Contrary to

Samuel Huntington's projections in *Clash of Civilizations*, Islam is not the fastest growing religion in the world: Christianity is. While Jenkins's projections fly in the face of received opinion, his argument is persuasive. Fully cognizant that statistics can prove anything, Jenkins projects the populations of countries into 2050 and the numbers of Christians and Muslims each will most likely include. Those numbers give Christianity a compelling lead. Excepting the United States, the most populous nations of 2050 are south of the equator, and it is the Southern Hemisphere where populations are exploding. Nigeria will have more people than Pakistan, Viet Nam more than Russia, Ethiopia more than Egypt, the Philippines more than Japan. Some of these countries have surprisingly large Christian populations, enough to be called Christian countries. (Jenkins has just written an article in *First Things* where he argues that even the United States, whose intelligentsia seem to think immigration has gotten us religious diversity, is increasingly Christian *because* of immigration, not despite it.)

These projections are indeed thrilling and sobering. Christian mission succeeded beyond its wildest expectations. On the other hand, these Christians in the south are not much affected by the Enlightenment's discovery that religion and politics should be separated by a wall, hence the word Christendom, but for now, a Christendom in which the average citizen is a poor woman of color with several children. According to Jenkins, these Christians "preach deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism and puritanism, all founded on clear scriptural authority" (8), which the northern mainline churches have gladly left behind them. Those on the left who call for increasing contact with the two-thirds world and its churches are uncomfortable with the conservative Christians they find there, and those on the right, while gleeful at discovering conservative brothers and sisters in these churches to the south—witness the extraordinary ordinations of Episcopal bishops in South Caro-

lina by African Anglican bishops—might conceivably go to war against Christians on behalf of Muslim war lords who have oil. Further, Christians and Muslims in countries such as Nigeria, the Philippines, the Kongo, Uganda, even Germany, where the number of Muslims is significant, are already warring between themselves, sometimes with a savagery that makes the thirteenth century seem desirable. Imagine, Jenkins writes, "the world of the thirteenth century armed with nuclear warheads and anthrax" (13).

How will believers in the northern climes understand themselves and the mission of Jesus Christ as the years move on? After a breathless read, and a few days soaking in the paradigm shift that left me dizzy, I could only take it as evidence of God's sense of humor, his best joke, a joke being a story with an unexpected ending. Any church leader knows that mission sells; you get money when you talk mission. But instead of the story ending with a pale, marble-faced, respectable train of Christians arguing about confessions, liturgy, or sexuality, the people who heard what our missionaries preached still believe what the missionaries preached—that Jesus is Lord and can do miracles. Because of the *Sitz-im-Leben* (*pace* Bultmann) of billions of Southern Hemisphere Christians, Christianity does better "when it takes very seriously the profound pessimism about the secular world that characterizes the New Testament" (220). These Christians will baffle many of the frozen chosen of the north.

What will American Catholics, only 5% of the 1.3 billion Catholics, do when they realize the Vatican, with a sure sense of the numbers, doesn't pay much attention to them? With one billion Pentecostals around the world by 2050, how will our press learn to report on this force if they cannot speak of John Ashcroft's religious convictions without laughing? How will our political leadership come to grips with regions of the world where one's Christian or Islamic identity cannot be separated from the state and takes precedence over one's national al-

legiances? Will mainline American Christians even recognize as brothers and sisters these Christians around the world? How will our attempts to make the faith more relevant to moderns look when a de-secularized people flocks to more immediate and spiritually fulfilling churches? How will the current theological enterprise of engaging postmodernism even matter now that Africans are sending missionaries north, European churches filling with fervent Christians from around the world, and Southern Anglican bishops condemning the faithless life and practice of their European and American brothers? Perhaps God is answering the current prayers of mainline churches for peace and justice, at least in part. Not much peace, but lots of justice—a church dying around us, while literally billions of Christians rise up to fill our vacant buildings with vibrant worship and lives dedicated to Christ as Lord.

Philip Jenkins, Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University, concludes his book musing on Christianity's incredible past: in 500, it was the religion of empire; in 1000, the religion of subject peoples on the edge of civilizations; in 1900, Christian empires dominated the world. Never underestimate, Jenkins warns, Christianity's incredible "ability to transform weakness into strength" (220).

This book reorganizes one's take on almost everything. Every page challenges one's old commonplaces about mission enterprise or the current state of the global church. There are delicious tidbits to add to one's trivia basket, e.g., that the King of the Kongo in the fifteenth century was named by the church, "Defender of the Faith"; that the Mongol king who sacked Baghdad in 1258 had a Christian queen who urged him to ransack the mosques there; to the latest demographic information that the Chinese currently flocking to Vancouver are establishing vibrant Chinese Christian congregations in far greater numbers than Buddhist or Taoist sites. Philip Jenkins is attracting increasing attention in the cultural debates

of the day because he effectively challenges the notion that Christianity is a fading religion and shows us a world we have never imagined, but had better be ready for.

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VISUAL FAITH: ART, THEOLOGY, AND WORSHIP IN DIALOG, by William A. Dyrness. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001. Pp.188. \$21.99 (paper).

(I.) Readers, be alert. Do not open this book if you looking for easy reading, simple answers, or lists of suggestions for "using" art in parish life. This book is something else altogether. Its author, William Dyrness, truly seeks to create a dialog within the book and stimulate dialog for those who read it. He cites the work of Rookmaaker approvingly when he writes, "We may not like the art of our time, but we must deal with the questions it raises, even as we are engaged with the culture that produced it. To avoid this is to deny our Christian responsibility" (96). It is also to spurn the potential for Christian renewal.

(II.) Within *Visual Faith* dialog begins in the introduction, "The Uneasy Relationship of Art and Faith," where Dyrness lays out a challenge and opportunity for contemporary Christians. He observes contemporary culture with a sharp eye, putting before us its power to use images to form our imaginations about reality. Therefore, he writes this book in part to help Christians grasp some of the "unique opportunities for Christian witness and spirituality—not only to renew themselves but in so doing to impact the larger culture" (21). Because Christians understand all arts, including visual art, as serving their relationship to God, Dyrness argues that worship is that embodied response that has "throughout Christian history...given birth to art" (23). The highly visual contemporary culture, our culture of spiritual seeking, and Christian interest in worship renewal may con-

verge, says Dyrness, in attention to the visual arts by Christians as expressions of faith.

Dyrness does not want to jettison our varied Christian heritage in order to get on board with some fad. Instead he welcomes our history, including Scripture, as dialog partner. He spends two chapters laying out a summary of Christians, Christianity, and the visual arts. The chapters divide at the Reformation period, a critical time for the affirmation or rejection of visual arts in many Protestant traditions. In the third chapter Dyrness looks at some of the biblical resources for consideration of the relationship of the “biblical drama” and beauty. He concludes that artists can help us not to miss “the values embedded in creation” and to witness to “the common grace.” But Christians, he believe, are called to creative activity that helps all of us imagine more clearly how the world is being “remade into a fit ‘symbol’ of God’s goodness” (85).

In the fourth chapter he explores the creative and redemptive work of great art as directly “tied to the work of Christ” in a trinitarian context (85). In this excellent chapter, tantalizing in its brevity, Dyrness offers a theological scan of some Christian theologians who have tried to think about beauty and/or art in writing. His work is especially worth pondering here. Dyrness acknowledges that art is both “nothing special,” in that it is simply one kind of human response to creation, and at the same time he insists that art is special. An artist calls the “world to a kind of rest or remind[s] it of its restlessness.” Art participates in the relationship of God’s creation to God. He suggests that “in some mysterious sense, all art aspires to be worship” (101). This last statement, dangerous as it sounds, comes as part of a reasoned argument to which a short review cannot do justice.

The remaining chapters wrestle with a short history of art and look at contemporary art in a clear-eyed way. The book concludes with a section that recapitulates his introductory observations and question, “Something is going on in Christian

churches, and fascinating changes are taking place in the art world. What does it all mean?” (155). He has many suggestions about answers, but he does not attempt to provide the definitive list of responses. Rather, the book is designed to encourage the second kind of dialog, that among those who care about these issues.

(III.) Dialog for those who read *Visual Faith* can emerge along several fronts. There is the call to read the Bible with eyes open to the biblical witness to the power of seeing that Dyrness only begins to examine. A great deal of fruitful encounter needs to happen here for Christians who take Scripture seriously.

Dialog can also emerge theologically. How do we understand our calling as embodied people of God in a world still fallen, still waiting, still yearning, and still needing to imagine God’s future? How are our ideas and hopes formed and shared? What and how do we learn from others? How is our mission shaped by convictions and imagination?

Dialog can and needs to happen about art itself as well as with artists. From where does art come? How do artists experience their work? What do they think about it? How does attention to visual images enhance worship—or not? What kind of engagement, energy, and excitement might be generated by communal attention to beauty, to what is perceived as ugliness?

All these processes are of importance, some urgency, and demand the full integrity of informed and generous attention on the part of church folk. Among the many strengths of this book are the following:

- 1) Frank acknowledgment and appreciation of our embodied reality. Serious attention is given to Christian theology as it developed throughout history, beginning with Scripture and including many twenty-first-century theologians. Dyrness, true to his title, engages in dialog with this history, trying to describe, critique, and glean what insights he can from each “participant,” whether that participant be the writer of Genesis, Martin Luther, Paul Tillich, or Jackson Pollock.

2) The call for Christian dialog with the visual arts for the sake of our own spiritual deepening and for the sake of witness. This call also suggests dialog across denominational lines, for different Christians encounter the visual arts with different theological emphases, histories, and convictions.

3) Acceptance of the ambiguous qualities inherent in art, the larger culture, and our theological understandings.

4) Good summary sections at the end of each chapter.

5) Good use of footnotes, just enough to help us locate the sources of Dyrness's argument without overwhelming us.

6) An excellent, up-to-date bibliography to further inform and stimulate our conversations, decisions, and behaviors.

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PREACHING JOHN, by Robert Kysar. Fortress Resources for Preaching. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002. Pp. 252. \$18.00 (paper).

The opening sentence expresses the background and perspective from which the author writes: "This book is the culmination of my whole career as a pastor and teacher" (xi). The two roles that Kysar has kept together vocationally come to full bloom in this excellent response to preaching from John. The careful and solid academic considerations of John are expressed for the purpose of preaching the word of the gospel. Kysar believes that preaching is inherent in the gospel's purpose. This volume is an excellent contribution to the Fortress Resources for Preaching series.

The introduction, "The Problem and Promise of Preaching John," opens consideration of John under three areas: The Gospel Genre, The Johannine Portrayal of Jesus, and The Threat of Pauline Intrusions. Chapter one, "A Tangle of Theses: Understanding Johannine Research," reviews in a

succinct and helpful way the major areas of current research in John: The Historical Origin of the Fourth Gospel, The Social Scientific Study of John, and The Literary Features of John. Chapter two, "Theological Themes: The Heart of Johannine Thought," paints in broad, discerning strokes the major themes in John: Johannine Christology, Paradox as a Theological Method, Sin and Evil, Faith and Salvation, and Christian Hope.

Chapter three, "The Word and Words: Johannine Language," identifies the language of John that "puzzles interpreters and teases preachers" (78). This is developed in two sections: John's Language and Preaching and The Metaphorical/Symbolic Language of John. Chapter four, "Words and Stories: Johannine Discourse and Narratives," discerns the distinction between the two forms by "the prominence of the voice" (98), whether Jesus' voice or narrator's voice is prominent. A helpful chart on pages 128-129 identifies the Structure of Narrative and Discourse-Dialogue in the Gospel of John.

Chapter five, "The King Enthroned: The Johannine Passion Story," provides an excellent overview of the Arrest, Trial and Crucifixion (John 18-19), and The Resurrection Appearances (John 20-21). Chapter six, "Fragments of Texts: John in the Lectionary," focuses on four areas of the gospel that are prominent preaching texts in the Revised Common Lectionary: The Prologue (1:1-18), Chapter 6—The Heavenly Bread, Chapters 14, 15, and 16—The Farewell, and Jesus' Prayer in Chapter 17.

The format of each of the six chapters is consistent. Following the exposition of the themes in each chapter is a section entitled Homiletical Implications, in which the author sketches out the relationship between the text and its focus toward preaching. This section is followed by a sermon example, which draws upon a sermon from a Johannine lectionary text. Examples are either sermon excerpts or complete sermons preached by the author and his spouse.

The beauty of this format throughout the volume is the movement from careful exegetical and interpretative work with the text, through the present-day implications of the text, and toward an actual example from the preaching of the text. This is not a wooden format, but one that works skillfully in expressing the author's commitment in holding together the careful study and preaching of the text. This format provides a valuable and usable format and is a paradigm for the preaching of textual and contextual sermons.

Preaching from John is not an easy task for the preacher. Because there is not a "Year D" in the lectionary devoted exclusively to John, the Fourth Gospel is "scattered" throughout Years A, B, and C. As one is working through the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke in Years A, B, and C—suddenly the preacher is faced, or even blindsided, with a text or texts from John. Not given a context within the gospel to draw upon from the previous Sunday, one enters into the quite different Johannine world from the worlds of the Synoptics. The volume responds to this dilemma pastors face with the lectionary. The preaching examples in the book are illustrative of lectionary texts assigned from John in Years A, B, and C.

This is a preaching-friendly volume! An appendix lists chronologically texts from "The Gospel of John in the Revised Common Lectionary." This is followed by three indices: the first index identifies the passages in John attended to in this volume; the second index identifies the sermons or sermon excerpts used in the volume to illustrate a particular interpretative aspect of John; the third index identifies the Gospel texts in John that occur in the lectionary in Years A, B, and C.

Explanatory footnotes are gathered together at the conclusion of the volume together with a four-page bibliography divided between volumes on the Gospel of John and preaching. The bibliography itself continues to illustrate the author's commitment in holding together the study and the

preaching of John in the life of the Christian community today.

The author is well aware of the "thick language" and "especially dense" (1) words of Jesus and the task of putting the Johannine Word into words, a reality that has faced interpreters of John from the very beginning. Kysar believes that the paradigm for preaching John resides in the gospel itself, its masterful composition, and its use of language and theology: "With words the evangelist brings us into a confrontation with the Word, Christ" (8). This in turn identifies the task that faces preachers today: "Our task is to let our congregation see the Johannine Jesus through our words" (14).

Throughout the volume the author deals forthrightly with some of the more perplexing and difficult aspects of interpreting John, such as: anti-Semitic "sounds" in the gospel, a sectarian identity of the Johannine community, sacramental interpretations, human decision and divine sovereignty, realized and future eschatology, the meaning of Logos, and Jesus as sacrificial or Passover lamb. Through all of these areas the author continues to hold before the reader and preacher the remarkable gift of John for the life of the church today. A sermon example on the prologue expresses what is at the heart and soul of this volume on preaching John: "John's Jesus reminds us that in Christ we meet the divine. In Christ the almighty God of the universe faces us. And we cannot understand this mystery. We cannot make him in our image. For he is the Word of God! The awesome other. The stranger from above come into our world..." (51).

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LISTENING MINISTRY: RETHINKING PASTORAL LEADERSHIP, by Susan K. Hedahl. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001. Pp 123. \$14.00 (paper).

While it is clear that I would appreciate a book about listening, as evidenced by my frequent reminder to students in the Foundations of Pastoral Care Course (since God gave us two ears and one mouth, it seems that we ought to listen twice as much as we speak), I'm more than normally appreciative of Susan K. Hedahl's book *Listening Ministry: Rethinking Pastoral Leadership*, which operates with a wholistic approach to listening that involves more than the ears alone. Her book is more than another pastoral care book on how to listen (although she argues and demonstrates that "how to" books on listening in pastoral care are somewhat rare), and more than a book that makes listening an autonomous discipline of choice according to one's aptitude. Instead, this book appropriately seeks to place listening at the core of ministry. In the beginning, I found the idea of a homiletician writing a book on listening somewhat intriguing. However, as I read the book and saw how she was approaching listening, the intrigue was replaced by gratitude for her approach that regards listening as integral to the preaching task.

I was initially taken aback by Hedahl's argument and subsequent demonstration of the lack of any pastoral care books on how one should listen. However, the further I read, it was clear that she was talking about more than the technique of listening, but listening as a skill set. In other words, the difference is technique without theory versus a skill set supported by a philosophy and a discipline of listening.

Readers of this text will greatly appreciate Hedahl's introduction to a wealth of resources. Most significant is her introduction to the work of Carolyn Gwyn Coakley and Andrew Wolvin, whose definition and subsequent taxonomy she employs throughout the rest of the book. There is even a helpful web page. The information

she provides about the historical tradition of listening does for the listening ministry what Thomas Oden, and others who have written about the classical tradition, have done for pastoral care, namely, reminding us that while both make use of the modern psychologies, they have prior histories. More specifically, for the listening ministry this means that listening is not just a product of the modern psychologies. All of this is important, because, while I suspect that we're already convinced that listening is vital to ministry, it is finally good to have a wider foundation upon which to rest our conviction, and access to a set of listening skills that can be obtained without having to pursue CPE supervisory status or training as a pastoral counselor. In bringing all of these components together, Hedahl offers the following definition of good pastoral listening:

A basic knowledge and command of listening skills and structures govern good pastoral listening. It is a theological activity, emerging from vocational and faith identity, present in all forms of ministry, and subject to pertinent societal and ecclesiastical boundaries. It can occur at sensory and non-sensory levels and is both individual and corporate in nature. (13)

Hedahl writes from an incarnational theological perspective that permeates the entire text, and is articulated most succinctly when she writes:

This theology of listening is active and incarnational; it weds theory and practice and involves community, leadership, ministry, listening, power, silence, and speech. Sadly, such interrelationships have often been ignored or denied. The logos of the Christian tradition is now drowning in the general logocentricity of the culture itself. "Word of God," perfect in its divine balance of speech and silence, is becoming almost indistinguishable from the morass of the words around us. (95)

Hedahl's work also has implications for how we think about the emerging practice

of spiritual direction, which she specifically addresses in the chapter “Listening at Heart’s Edge: God, Self, and Community.” In this chapter she appropriates for the discussion the contributions to contemplative listening of the Rule of St. Benedict, Søren Kierkegaard, and Douglas V. Steere from the Quaker tradition. In this chapter, readers will find her discussion about discernment quite useful. For her, discernment involves what she describes as “Godward listening.” Furthermore, she writes:

If Godward pastoral listening—that is, the personal faith relationship of the minister—is “overheard” in faith communities, it would seem that a logical response would be for the pastor to connect with parishioners through different instructional methods of Godward listening to deepen the mutuality of discernment. (52)

In this chapter and throughout the book, Hedahl provides concrete examples and case studies to demonstrate listening ministry. For discernment, she provides an exam-

ple of how guided imagery was used in a corporate worship setting. As far as I’m concerned, the following contention by Hedahl should be regarded as definitive for discernment: “Of all the listening unique to the Christian faith, pastoral listening must have Godward listening as its baseline; without it other forms of listening are rendered ineffective or insincere” (55).

The information and insight from this book kept seeping into every aspect of my thinking about how I, as a seminary professor, long to prepare men and women for parish ministry. The chapter “Corporate Godward Listening: Worship and Preaching” is profoundly practical. The learnings that I have gleaned from *Listening Ministry: Rethinking Pastoral Leadership* will be working their way into the content of all my courses, but perhaps more importantly they will profoundly affect the way I teach and minister.

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