Reviews

CAPTIVE TO THE WORD OF GOD: ENGAGING THE SCRIPTURES FOR CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION, by Miroslav Volf. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. Pp. 192. $18.00 (paper).

Defending his Reformation activities at the Diet of Worms, Luther confessed that he could not recant because his conscience was "captive to the word of God" as interpreted by reason ("Luther at the Diet of Worms" in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. [Philadelphia and St. Louis; Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986] 32:112). Thus Miroslav Volf titles this collection of six essays, all of which—save the first—were written previously over the course of sixteen years. Having introduced his tool, Volf then puts it to work, cracking into vexing contemporary issues using theological expositions of Scripture. This review engages the methodological impetuses of chapter 1 most fully and summarizes the remaining sections.

Chapter 1 is entitled "Reading the Bible Theologically." Volf's own summary is in some ways sufficient: "In this book I, a systematic theologian, interpret texts of the Christian Scriptures. This may be all that you, the reader, want and need to know by way of introduction" (7). The simplicity of this statement reveals its weight: why should such prolegomena even be necessary? After summarizing fundamental Enlightenment precursors, Volf explains with regret how in the mid twentieth century

> systematic theologians abandoned the Bible to biblical scholars-turned-historians, and biblical scholars offloaded theology onto systematic theologians. The result? Locked in a distant past, the Bible became lost to the present, as far as academic theology was concerned. (8–9)

This fragmentation led to loss of identity. "Take the Scriptures away, and sooner or later you will 'un-church' the Church" (10). Yet in recent years, the divide has begun to heal—thanks in no small part to Volf's previous works. His current work calls this reunion of Scripture and systematics "the most significant theological development in the last two decades" (14).

Volf then lays out premises that inform the remaining essays. Scripture is an ancient text requiring inquiry into original settings but it is neither a vague collection of "religious wisdom" nor an otherworldly, epic fiction. Scripture is not merely classic spiritual literature or a narrative of what God did, but a medium for what God is doing today. Perhaps more controversially, Volf suggests that Scripture does not only have an *external* unity constructed by canon but also an *internal* unity devised from a central story.

Whilst acknowledging that a creative person can make a biblical text mean just about anything, Volf rejects the notion that Scripture is an empty canvas awaiting our watercolors of meaning. Rather, texts have "inherent meanings" (28). Employing Marx's terminology, texts are *social relations*: "something crafted by someone in order to say (and more broadly, to do) something to somebody else" (28). Thus readers have a "moral obligation to the writer" before personal interests and purposes are allowed to intrude (32).

Building on his work in *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf calls for a "hermeneutic of respect," (as opposed to suspicion):

> If we practice a hermeneutic of respect, however, we can continue to engage the

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> text without suppressing puzzlement or even negative judgment, while patiently waiting for the sense to emerge, either as a result of a new insight or of a personal transformation. In our encounter with the Bible, tarrying in persistent non-understanding is often the condition of the possibility of genuine disclosure, in which we hear more than just the echo of our own internal voice. (35)

Volf's navigation of thorny contemporary hermeneutical issues is admirable. He summarizes broad debates and centuries of development without being overly simplistic or dismissive. A reader unfamiliar with Volf's previous work or current hermeneutical debates can still profit from this accessible format. Lengthy footnotes (some spanning multiple pages) engage Volf's contemporaries on specific issues, leaving the main text clean for those readers interested primarily in what he has to say about the Bible.

Chapter 2, "Theology for a Way of Life," engages the pertinent question, What can academic theology offer to real life? Volf contends that "at the heart of every good theology lies not simply a theological vision but more importantly a compelling account of a way of life" (43). Chapter 3, "Soft Difference: Church and Culture in 1 Peter," is arguably his most compelling application of the hermeneutic of respect. Volf draws a mediating line between the classic sociological categories of world-*accommodating* "church" vs. world-*denying* "sect." First Peter's description of Christians as "aliens and sojourners" is rooted in transformation—not separation. Chapter 4, "Peculiar Politics: John's Gospel, Dualism, and Contemporary Pluralism," argues that John's Gospel is not itself dualistic but rather employs dualistic tension, showing how the world is in dualistic opposition to its creator and thus requires redemption. Volf then explores how this insight can inform contemporary debates on pluralism. Chapter 5, "God is Love: Biblical Reflections on a Fundamental Christian Claim in Conversation with Islam," discusses more broadly what this oft cited phrase means in 1 John 4 and how this affirmation functions in Muslim-Christian dialogue. Finally, Chapter 6, "Hunger for Infinity: Christian Faith and the Dynamics of Economic Progress," explores Ecclesiastes and the insatiability of human materialism. After reviewing underlying assumptions of the Protestant work ethic and the producer-consumer balance, Volf comes to the fundamental conclusion that "the economic problem cannot be solved by economic means alone" (158).

The topic of each essay will interest some more than others, but the lingering importance of this book is Volf's approach. *Captive to the Word of God* is compellingly composed, accessible to non-scholars and, one hopes, a harbinger of more biblically grounded systematic theology to come.

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AS CHRIST SUBMITS TO THE CHURCH: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LEADERSHIP AND MUTUAL SUBMISSION, by Alan G. Padgett. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011. Pp. 151. $19.99 (paper).

As Christ Submits to the Church articulates a coherent biblical view of leadership, particularly in regard to gender roles. As the title suggests, Padgett asserts that Christ submits to the church in loving service and calls his followers to submit to one another in this same way.

In his first chapter, Padgett reviews debates over gender roles in evangelical circles, highlighting the ongoing debate between complementarians and egalitarians. The complementarian view holds that women and men are equal before God but have different, complementary roles in the home and church, in which women should submit to men. The egalitarian view finds biblical grounds for gender equality in all aspects of church and domestic life.

Padgett clearly sides with the egalitarian view and provides sound biblical and theological reasoning for his position. Before delving into biblical texts, however, he delineates his approach to reading Scripture, which he calls a "threefold sense" of Scripture. The *conventional* sense of Scripture is its plain sense in historical context, the *canonical* sense reads the part in light of the whole of Scripture, and the *contemporary* sense seeks application to life in the present day. Particularly important is Padgett's understanding that the canonical sense is Christocentric, orienting our reading of Scripture toward Jesus Christ and the Triune God. No single verse of Scripture can determine the church's view on gender relationships. The whole of Scripture, centered in Christ, shapes our understanding.

In chapter two, Padgett explores Pauline texts that speak of mutual submission. In Eph 5:21–33, Padgett argues that verse 21, "Submit yourselves to one another in reverence for Christ," is the overarching theme that applies to both husbands and wives, and indeed, to all Christians. The ideal of mutual submission finds expression also in Galatians 5:13, and comes powerfully to the fore in Phil 2:1–5, where Paul urges believers to look to the interests of others, having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. The mind of Christ, of course, is described as one of self-emptying submission, taking the form of a slave, and being obedient even to the point of death on a cross (Phil 2:6–11).

Next, Padgett turns to the Gospels, where Jesus consistently teaches and lives a model of leadership that is loving service to others. Jesus rejects the worldly notion of authority as "lording it over" others, and teaches his disciples that being a leader means being the "slave of all" (Mark 9:35; 10:41–44). "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45). In John's Gospel, Jesus poignantly enacts his teaching about servanthood by washing his disciples' feet, exhorting them to follow his example (John 13:3–17).

In his third chapter, Padgett engages Pauline passages dealing with gender roles. He returns to Eph 5, emphasizing again that 5:21 applies to both husbands and wives. Though wives are told to submit to their husbands (5:22), husbands are told to love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (5:25)—i.e., with self-giving, sacrificial love. There is no permanent, unbending hierarchy set up, but exhortation for husbands and wives to serve one another freely and lovingly. Just as Christ submits to the church not in a permanent hierarchy, but by willingly taking the role of a servant, so husbands and wives are to love and serve one another out of reverence for Christ.

Padgett next examines gender roles in 1 Corinthians, noting the egalitarian nature of Paul's advice to married couples in 7:1–5. Analyzing 1 Cor 14:33–36, he concludes that the injunction for women to be silent had to do with a particular situation of certain women disrupting worship by asking questions, and was not intended to be a universal rule. The context of the passage is concern for order and peace in worship.

Context is critical also to understanding passages in 1 Peter and the Pastoral Epistles, which Padgett takes up in chapter four. These letters come from a later period, when the church was dealing with both internal threats from false teachers and external threats from growing opposition to the movement. The exhortations to submission in these letters are not mutual, but based on the established social hierarchy of Roman households. They demonstrate concern for the public reputation of the Christian faith in situations of instability and persecution, and thus are not normative for every time and place.

In chapter five, Padgett offers a fresh reading of 1 Cor 11:2–16, the passage about head coverings in worship, based on reading "from the bottom up"—i.e., starting with the concluding point of Paul's argument. He asserts that verses 3–7a present the Corinthians' views, and that Paul corrects their mistaken assumptions about head coverings and gender roles by showing that, "in the Lord," differences of dress and custom between male and female are of no importance, since all people come from God (11:11–12).

In his final chapter, Padgett emphasizes that the ethic of submission must never be used to justify abuse and oppression. The command to submit is spoken first of all to those in power who, like Jesus, are called to serve and empower others, especially those who are weak. Ultimately, the ethic of mutual submission is grounded in the command to love God above all and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Padgett has made a valuable contribution to the conversation about biblical views of leadership and gender roles, one that takes seriously what it means to follow Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve. His book merits careful consideration by all who care about Christ-centered leadership and community life.

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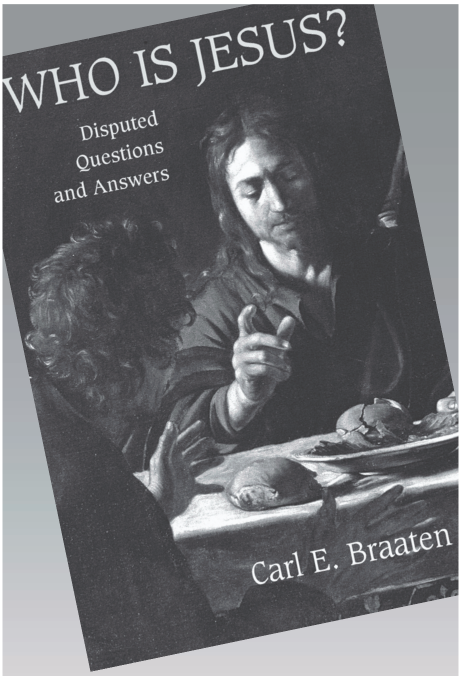
FORTUNATE FALLIBILITY: KIERKEGAARD AND THE POWER OF SIN, by Jason A. Mahn. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 265. $74.00 (cloth).

Jason Mahn has written a book that is at once a major contribution to the broad and deep stream of Kierkegaard research and a challenging resource for Christians concerned about simplistic reductions of the meaning of sin. Perhaps it should not surprise us that these achievements come together. The enigmatic Dane wrote to reform Christendom, and the long tradition of congregational book studies of his works continues, stimulated by recent publications such as Albert Anderson's *Kierkegaard* (Lutheran University Press, 2010). There is a tendency in some postmodern readings of Kierkegaard to limit discussion to the parade of pseudonyms and editors he employed. Mahn is fully conversant with postmodern strictures against abstractions and the "essentializing" of this father of existentialist thought. He will emphasize that SK speaks with plural voices and refuses to flatten out the differences in the speaking. But he correctly observes that he has written "not a postmodern reading of Kierkegaard but a Kierkegaardian reading of self and sin" (23). At the heart of that reading is the conviction that "our relationship with sin…exceeds (without entirely overthrowing) the measures of moral accountability" (6).

How is this delicate task to be accomplished? The bulk of the book is a careful exposition of the central pseudonymous writings of "our gadfly guide." But Kierkegaard comes into a much wider conversation. Mahn's own summary of the range of reference emphasizes that he has sought to work within a "Pauline-Lutheran tradition, which intersects also with the fifth century Latin Mass [for Easter Eve] and, more oddly, with a French postmodern a/theistic Jew [Emmanuel Levinas]" (157). That Easter Eve liturgy constantly resurfaces in the book and should be cited as we engage the Kierkegaard readings: "O truly necessary sin of Adam, which is cancelled by Christ's death! O happy fault (*felix culpa*) which merited such and so great a redeemer!" Mahn clearly recognizes that "fallibility" is not "fault" (4, 8), but he will argue "that Kierkegaard repeats the rhetorical patterns and deep theological logic of fortunate Fall when he persistently perceives grace through the fractures of human fallibility" (2). Mahn offers a Kierkegaard who will read both fallibility and fault in the light of redemption, suggesting "neither simple orthodoxy nor paradox alone, but a kind of para/orthodoxy" (3).

Early on, Mahn works with *Fear and Trembling* and well remembers that pseudonymous author John the Silent One cannot understand Abraham on the way to Mount Moriah. There is indeed a "teleological suspension of the ethical," as Abraham draws the knife. But the heart of Mahn's exposition draws us into the density of *The Concept of Anxiety* by Vigilius Haufniensis (the watchman of Copenhagen) and Anti-Climacus's (the "decisively Christian" pseudonym) works, *The Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*. So we encounter *felix fragilitas* (in *CA*), *felix fallibilitas* (in *SD*) and *felix offensatio* (in *PC*). The book closes helpfully with a consideration of Kierkegaard's signed ("veronymous") works drawing on his own talk of "two-handedness" to locate the argument firmly on Holy Saturday, between cross and resurrection.

The Concept of Anxiety's steadfast emphasis on individual responsibility for sin would seem unpromising territory for an effort to resist "the moralization of sin." But Mahn well notes the plural voices in the book, highlighting how "dogmatics" and "psychology" both will be involved in what we come to say of "the fortune of human fallibility" (173). In every chapter Mahn is a very close and careful reader of these elusive texts, but perhaps the passage that serves him most directly is from *The Sickness unto Death*, where Anti-Climacus asks, "Is despair an excellence or a defect? Purely dialectically, it is both. . . . The possibility of this sickness is man's superiority over the animal. . . . to be able to despair is an infinite advantage, and yet to be in despair is not only the worst misfortune and misery—no, it is ruination" (*SD*, 15). Anti-Climacus knows that, over against the spiritless citizens of Copenhagen, conscious despair is "dialectically closer" to healing (173). In turn, *Practice* lifts up "a particular and peculiar Christ [who] means to bring healing and rest but does not and cannot



"Few are more highly qualified than Carl Braaten to offer commentary — and enduring perspectives — on the so-called 'quest for the historical Jesus.' . . . Braaten's conclusion is emphatic: Jesus Christ can never be the end-product of a scholarly 'quest'; rather, the necessary eyewitness accounts have already been entrusted to Christ's church through divine revelation. Whether or not we have the fortitude to embrace that witness is another matter."
— **J. Daryl Charles**

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do so without making offense exceedingly possible" (173).

What a ride on this *Via Negativa*! Jason Mahn is well aware of the risks such a journey entails. He knows that speaking finally of "*Felicitas,*" of joy in the cross, will raise feminist objections to any talk of sorrow expressing itself in joy (188). He recognizes that in rejecting univocal discourse he risks "fideism," "belief in belief, which is but another crafty form of self-confidence" (50). The liturgy's analogical speech, resisting "unbounded equivocation," will not give up a claim to truth but must proceed without the "assurance of having comprehended what it says" (50). It is difficult to live on Holy Saturday, to maintain one's balance in the "in-between." Living there, can one for example be certain that all theodical ventures are rooted in self-justifying motives (cf. *CA*'s critique of Hegel's interpretation of the Fall "not because it is bad theodicy but because it *is* theodicy," 64)? But, such uneasiness aside, Jason Mahn profoundly offers Christian readers the pastoral wisdom of learning to speak of sin in plural voices. He wisely calls for "reading sin backward from the special revelation of Christ rather than forward from the idea of a primal unity" (211). Perhaps that angle of vision is the concrete expression of what Kierkegaard called "the infinite qualitative difference." In the face of that, one might well utter the decentering "O!"

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CONVERSIONS: TWO FAMILY STORIES FROM THE REFORMATION AND MODERN AMERICA, by Craig Harline. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. Pp. 320. $27.50 (cloth).

Craig Harline, author of *Conversions* and professor of history at Brigham Young University, is perhaps better acquainted with conversion than most scholars due to his years as a Mormon missionary. Harline's personal investment pervades *Conversions* in both his methodology and storyteller's tone. For example, Harline eschews quotation marks and footnotes in order to preserve his narrative prose. This uniquely intimate approach is one reason to read *Conversions*, and makes it highly suitable for book groups, sermon anecdotes, or recreational reading.

Despite the title, Harline's narrative history actually traces three conversion stories from three centuries: Jacob Rolandus converts from the Reformed church to Catholicism in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, Michael Sunbloom converts to and from Mormonism and grapples with his emerging sexuality in twentieth-century America, and the author's great-grandparents leave their Swedish Lutheran roots for Mormonism in nineteenth-century Stockholm. Harline's text dedicates chapters to these different stories in alternation. This structure serves Harline's purpose, which is to hold seemingly unrelated narratives in tension so that the more familiar aspects of one story may lend familiarity and significance to seemingly irrelevant history.

Jacob is the primary subject of the book and best exemplifies the religious conversion dynamic with which Harline claims to be concerned. Jacob's story—cobbled together from his own encoded journal, family correspondence, legal and ecclesiastical records, and Jesuit archives—is about his daring midnight flight from his family home to Catholic Antwerp. Because of the breadth of primary source material, Harline is able to paint a fairly comprehensive picture of Jacob's motives and his family's reactions. For example, it illustrates the devastating effect Jacob's conversion has on his family members, and inspires reflection on the role and education of women. The Rolandus family story heartrendingly demonstrates the complexity and trauma of religious conversion.

Jacob's modern corollary is Michael Sunbloom. Harline's treatment of Michael's story seems less germane to the book's stated purpose than the Rolandus story. The Sunbloom narrative comes to be dominated by Michael's gradual discernment of his own homosexuality, and not his conversion to and from Mormonism. This reader was occasionally confused as to why it was included in this book about religious conversions. Harline was aware of this potential criticism at the time of his writing, and included a justification in his postscript. Harline writes that he decided to include the Sunbloom story because he "wanted to show explicitly how the distant past could possibly have meaning in the present, and vice versa" (269). All well and good, but the most relevant component of Michael's story (namely his conversion) is given relatively little attention. Having said that, Harline's treatment of Michael's personal revelation is stirring (he is a close personal friend to Michael and a witness to many of the narrated events). Many readers will be moved by the chapters dealing with Michael's growing awareness of his sexual orientation and his emotionally fraught conversations with his parents.

The story about Harline's Swedish great-grandparents (the Härlins) is given much less space than the other two narratives, and exists primarily as an appendix to his methodological commentary. Therefore this review also treats those two elements alongside one another. Harline gets into some bizarre territory when he discusses conversion tables and method acting techniques like Affective Memory (19ff.). Basically, he wants to explain the process by which one takes an historical account, selects a more recent and personally relevant story, and accesses the significance of the past event via the personal significance of the more recent one (see especially the fourth chapter and postscript). In that context the Härlin conversion story is presented as a less effective Affective Memory (44). There are three reasonable critiques to raise beyond the simple confusion caused by including a third conversion narrative in a book titled "Two Family Stories." First, if the Härlin story doesn't suffice, it either shouldn't be included or it should be mentioned only in passing to set up the memory Harline actually intends to pair with the Rolandus story, which is to say the Sunbloom story. Second, the Härlin story is actually quite applicable, and therefore perhaps deserves more attention than the Sunbloom story. Third, the Härlin and Sunbloom stories illustrate a flaw in the method. They contribute nothing to the reader's ability to understand and empathize with the Rolandus story. Although it occurred over 250 years ago, the beauty of the Rolandus story and the primary sources Harline discovered is that they convey such a timelessly personal story, requiring no additional contextualization.

Ultimately, Harline has produced a moving and valuable book. His narrative style uncovers the drama and relevance of seemingly stale historical accounts. The informal style makes it less useful in a scholarly sense, but more entertaining and accessible. For that reason, students of history will appreciate *Conversions* most for its ability to contextualize historical events and concepts. More casual readers will appreciate Harline's engaging writing, some rather incredible historical connections (look especially for the Walt Disney and Van Gogh anecdotes), and the intimate insights into family trauma.

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GRAND ENTRANCE: WORSHIP ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN, by Edith M. Humphrey. Brazos Press, 2011. Pp. 244. $22.99 (paper).

Much recent literature on worship purports to resolve intractably differing positions concerning "the worship wars" without ever actually transcending the terms of the present intractability. Theologies of worship are unique among the theological disciplines in always needing to take the temperature of the current scuffles, which is why books with titles like *Beyond the Worship Wars* or *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* can be brisk sellers.

Theologians of worship compose much that does not worry itself over these perennial debates, but most of this production is *for* Christian worship rather than *about* Christian worship. Many pastors, though attuned to the spectacular resources at their disposal for worship planning and liturgy construction, may be weary of picking up books that are once again initiating a meta-conversation on a topic that is abstracted from their particular historical or sacramental locus.

That being said, here is my advice: Try this one. Edith M. Humphrey enters the fray of competing theologies of Christian worship with a genuinely interesting thesis. "The rancor and fighting found among North American Christians when they discuss worship needs to be placed in the context of a big idea. Worship should not be considered only in terms of relevance for today, or in terms of beautiful music and good aesthetics; rather, worship is *entry*" (3). Note that Humphrey admits she is entering into the "worship wars" conversation, but is doing so with a proposal for a big idea that, perhaps, can transcend the war and change the terms of the discussion.

I believe she does succeed in reframing the conversation, even if she does not successfully place the entirety of the worship wars in a big-idea context. Her social location plays a large part in the irresolution of her success. Humphrey, in the book's preface, shares that this book was written "during the last stages of a pilgrimage that began over thirteen years ago and that was fulfilled in a concrete (though not final) manner when I was received in the Orthodox Church by 'chrismation' (anointing with oil) on Pentecost, 2009" (ix.) Her conversion, as well as her previous ecclesial locations, influence her perspective. This is the greatest weakness of the book, and also its greatest strength. There are very few theologians or worshipers who have the breadth of charitable experience Humphrey does—from worship in the Salvation Army, to Protestantism, to Roman Catholicism, and finally to Orthodoxy.

For readers most interested in the grand proposal concerning the grand entrance, I recommend the first five chapters of the book in particular. The first chapter is a succinct and helpful chapter on individual prayer and corporate worship. The next four chapters trace the theme of entrance in the Old Testament, New Testament, traditional liturgies of the East, and traditional liturgies of the West. This genealogy of "entrance" benefits readers, giving them a new entry point into reading Scripture and historic liturgies as entrance into worship. Generally speaking, Humphrey concludes that "worship appointed for the Lord involves entrance into a large company, space, and action; to objectify and critique worship…precludes any such entrance" (36). It calls for "preparation, repentance, memory, continuity, integrity, and a deliberate resolve to make room for each other" (57). Ultimately, entrance into worship is made possible, and invited by, the Lord.

These early chapters are winsome, analytical, and smart, and they stick to their theme. However, in the next chapter, Humphrey takes a tour of modern-day Christian worship. This chapter reads more like notes from a road trip than sustained analysis of entrance playing out in these contexts. The bigger problem, however, arises in the next chapter on "Avoiding Pitfalls in Public Worship." As much as

Humphrey has attempted to "consider past liturgies and practice, as much as possible, with a sympathetic eye, looking to learn from our older siblings" (113), she does not extend this same level of sympathy to more Pentecostal or evangelical styles of worship. It would have been much more interesting, in this late stage of the book, to read Humphrey's analysis of the relative merits of the liturgies of the East as they compared to, say, entrance in Western liturgies, or even an internal comparison of two Eastern liturgies themselves.

Instead, the final chapter is an ad hoc set of criticisms of contemporary worship a theologian who has recently been received by chrismation into the Orthodox church is likely to level—contemporary worship is too focused on atmospherics, worship is too "me"-centered, praise songs are inadequately theologically poetic, worship tries to be à la carte rather than tied to a particular tradition, and worship is often abused as a marketing tool (or even on the market). Clearly, these are all problematic approaches to worship that churches *other* than Orthodox churches are falling into. Humphrey does not turn a critical enough eye to her own tradition, something she admits up front when she says that "Eastern Orthodox are not predisposed to evaluate how things 'went'" (1). Yes, but if a book like this is going to critique how things are going in Christian worship, the same critical tools need to be applied to all the traditions, not just the "newer" ones.

Humphrey can still write such a book that includes more internal critique, and when she does, I will buy it and read it. I have benefited immensely from her main thesis, been warned by some of the dangers of her method, and am thankful for the broadly ecumenical nature of her approach.

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A JOURNEY OF GRACE: THE FORMATION OF A LEADER AND A CHURCH (AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY), by Herbert W. Chilstrom. Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2011. xvii + 614 pp. $28.00 (paper).

This book is the autobiography of Herbert Chilstrom, prominent American Lutheran leader in the second half of twentieth century, most notably as the first presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1987–1995. His story is a fascinating one—of a young, ambitious, and dedicated man who rose from humble origins to the head of a major American Protestant denomination. In his narrative we have one insider's account of the development of this denomination, and a description of the persons and events that determined its early course. It is a memoir, with all the power and limitations of that genre: giving us a sense of how one individual saw events, yet necessarily something written significantly after the fact. Chilstrom does quote extensively from contemporary sources, most notably his own letters and writings, but it is also clear that, at least in some parts, hindsight does necessarily color the interpretation of the events. He is candid, forthright, and does not flinch from describing difficult situations that arose in his life and his career, something that has been a hallmark of his career. Yet at times one might actually wish that he had been more reflective about these events, perhaps even second-guessing directions and decisions (more about this later).

The first half of the book is about his early life in central Minnesota, his education and call to the ministry, his career as a Bible teacher and parish pastor, and finally his service as President/Bishop of the Minnesota Synod of the LCA, from 1976 to 1987. He describes himself as an "Evangelical conservative with a radical social conscience," and the journey to this point is well described here, especially his evolution from a conservative religious position (molded in the Lutheran Bible Institute tradition) to more liberal social positions, especially on the issue of homosexuality. The second half of the book describes his work on the Commission for the New Lutheran Church (1982–1987), which led to the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988, in which Chilstrom served two terms as its first presiding Bishop (1987–1995). These were tumultuous years in American Lutheranism, and he clearly shows his insights and positions on the difficulties of getting this new denomination up and running. There is surprisingly little material on his life and career after 1995, or reflections on what has happened to the ELCA since 1995.

There are many important insights on his time in the CNLC and the ELCA to be gleaned from this book. One of them is his early and long-running advocacy of the acceptance of homosexuality, something that is clear from the mid-1970s onward. He had long felt that this was an issue with regard to which the church had to change, and he has been forthright about this. Another insight was his candid appraisal of the need to radically reorganize the ELCA, as early as 1992, a proposal that he eventually withdrew as being too radical for the time. But most important is his portrait of the power and limitations of the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA. He acknowledges that the Presiding Bishop really has very little constitutional power, and relies heavily on the cooperation of Synodical Bishops (and other powerful individuals in the church). When he was initially elected in 1987, there were hopes that he would be a good compromise, a Midwestern Scandinavian LCA leader who could bridge the gaps between ALC and LCA, but his narrative suggests that he was not completely successful in this. His comments about difficulties with his predecessors in the ALC (David Preus) and the LCA (Robert Marshall and James Crumley), as well as powerful ELCA bishops (such as Kenneth Sauer), suggest that he was not able to bridge some of these divides, at least not as fully as he might have hoped. The people with whom he seemed to have the best relations and who could influence his decisions were fellow leaders out of the Augustana Synod—individuals such as Paul Werger, Reuben Swanson, and Conrad Bergendoff.

It is clear in the narrative that Chilstrom believes that the formation of the ELCA, as it was done, was good, necessary, and a natural and positive move for American Lutheranism. Yet at this point one wishes for more reflection and nuance, especially after the fact. Chilstrom dismisses David Preus's ambivalence toward the CNLC process during the 1980s, but in retrospect attention to his concerns, and alternative models to the one selected by the CNLC, might have been well heeded. Perhaps the early difficulties of the ELCA, with which he had to deal so painfully, might have been avoided or at least mitigated. On page 570 Chilstrom quotes approvingly a statement by William McKinney that church leaders ought to pay less attention to "fringe groups," and more toward a "reinvigorated middle." This is good advice, to be sure, but in practice it might seem that Chilstrom was naturally more attuned to the concerns of the liberal fringe than to those of the conservative fringe. It all depends, perhaps, on how one defines the "middle."

This is an important and valuable book for the history of American Lutheranism, and Chilstrom is to be commended for it. We need more such books from those who have led the church so that we can understand the processes that have brought us to this point, and the dynamics with which current and future leaders will have to deal.

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