Word & World 9/4 (1989)
"REVIEWS"
Copyright © 1989 by Word & World, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. All rights reserved.

FREDERICK BUECHNER: NOVELIST AND THEOLOGIAN OF THE LOST AND FOUND, by Marjorie Casebier McCoy with Charles S. McCoy. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. Pp.183. $14.95.

In order to properly evaluate this book, one must first struggle with the question of genre. For instance, if you are looking for a critical review of the work of Frederick Buechner, you will be disappointed. From page one we find a glowing tribute to this author's work, without any hint of critique. Or if you look to this book for a comprehensive biographical sketch of the author, you will be disappointed. McCoy gives a summary in chapter four, but biography is not her main objective. And if you go to this book not expecting anything profound or of substance, you will be surprised, as I was. This book carries a rather ambitious argument through to the end about the "covenant" relationship of theology and art. No matter where the librarian places this book on the shelf, I fear he or she will be delightfully mistaken.

The book does concern itself with the work of Frederick Buechner. Through seven chapters, generous with quotations and summaries, we get a good look at the author's writing style and substance. Marjorie McCoy admits very openly that her book is not a critical review, for she has found great meaning and inspiration in Buechner's writing, and she wants to share this great find with others. She lends credibility to the book by stating this bias openly from the outset. And what is it that inspired her to become a disciple of Buechner? She writes:

> As novelist/theologian of the lost and found, Frederick Buechner has a depth and sensitivity encountered all too seldom. He knows how to tell a story, tell it well, and tell it so that it moves from the experienced surface of our lives into the most significant recesses of existence....His theological writing is shaped by his ability as storyteller, and his fiction is permeated by an informed theological perspective. (19)

And on a more personal note, "When I enter the world of Buechner's novels, I feel as though I am living in them and living through them. Each of the characters becomes a facet of myself-to be worried over, laughed at, judged, cleansed, and returned to its place as part of me... (143). These and many other testimonials give us a perspective on Buechner's writing and a desire to see for ourselves.

Out of Buechner's thirteen fictional works, nine pieces of non-fiction, and two autobiographies, McCoy identifies the following predominant themes: The Sacredness of Ordinary Human Experience; Redemption and Grace in the Whole Creation, Including the Ridiculous and the Obscene; The Search to Be Known, to Be Forgiven, to Be Healed, to Be Loved; The Presence of Meaning in the Apparently Random Events of Life; The Blessedness of Comedy, Laughter, and the Antic Style; The Precarious Nature of Life and Relationship

Enhances Meaning Experienced in the Present; and Faith as the Belief That the Worst Thing is Never the Last Thing.

We get a sense here of the earthiness of Buechner's style. His theology never leaves the ground. So he can talk about suffering, death, and salvation under the modest heading, "The Worst Thing is Never the Last Thing," as he thinks about his own struggles with illness and meaninglessness and his father's suicide. And Marjorie McCoy, suffering from terminal brain cancer during the writing of this book, finds

meaning and hope as well in this earthy theological understatement. For those who have read Buechner, McCoy puts his work into a helpful perspective. For those who have not read him, she creates an appetite to do so.

This book also concerns itself briefly with Buechner's life. He asserts that theology and fiction are essentially autobiographical, meaning that you can't separate the work from the author. Hence, Buechner writes out of his experience as a Christian, not as a Christian propagandist or dogmatist. To illustrate, Buechner relates his own conversion story, how he was lost in meaninglessness and then was found one day in the midst of a sermon:

> And then with his head bobbing up and down so that his glasses glittered, he said in his odd, sandy voice, the voice of an old nurse, that the coronation of Jesus took place among confession and tears, and then, as God was and is my witness, great laughter, he said. Jesus is crowned among confession and tears and great laughter, and at the phrase great laughter, for reasons that I have never satisfactorily understood, the great wall of China crumbled and Atlantis rose up out of the sea, and on Madison Avenue, at 73rd Street, tears leapt from my eyes as though I had been struck across the face. (11; quoted from *The Alphabet of Grace*)

The highly particular experience of Jesus Crowned in the heart of this believer among confession, tears, and great laughter also has a universal appeal. It is a kind of theological framework unto itself. Through the universality and particularity of this conversion story it becomes art, a vehicle of meaning for all of us. And so it is important to know something of Buechner, the man, because his writing proceeds so directly from his own experience. That is a good reason for any reader of Buechner to also read Marjorie McCoy.

Finally we move to the main theme or argument of the book. Central to McCoy's treatment of Buechner and his work is her bold apologetic for the covenant of art and theology.McCoy is critical of the artificial separation of the two elsewhere:

> Until recently, theology has been limited almost completely to dry, logical, and inartistic discussions of a series of standard topics....Biblical scholarship has usually been preoccupied with linguistic, historical, and textual matters, as though what is collected in the Jewish-Christian Scriptures has little or no relation to the traditions and communities of human believing that assembled, validated, preserved, and continue to make use of these writings in worship and as wellsprings of faith and action.

> And novelists often write as though they are unaware of any religious dimensions of believed-in reality shaping the world delineated in the enveloping action of their work. From reading most contemporary fiction, it would appear that many human beings go neither to church nor to the toilet....(14)

McCoy sees in the work of Buechner a fresh approach which rises above this either/or relationship of art and theology. He is both novelist and theologian in the same stroke of the pen. So distinctive is Buechner in this regard, that McCoy calls his work "a new creation" (22). McCoy sees this covenant of art and theology coming out of the Scriptures with their richness in story and metaphor. It is a natural and necessary covenant.

> Theology as storytelling about what we believe to be real merges into fiction as the artistic presentation of experience reaches toward meaning. In the perspective of Buechner's new creation, the bond between art and theology is necessary and complete. (23)

I want to cautiously agree with McCoy at this point. I am in agreement because of the incarnational nature of this covenant, because of its harmony with the forms of Scripture, and because of its possibilities for Christian proclamation. I am cautious out of respect for the complexities and precision of systematic theology and biblical studies which may not always lend themselves to storytelling. But in the context of Buechner's work and intent, this covenant of art and theology often puts its finger on the truth in beautiful and moving fashion. The Christian church could use more of the same from pulpit and press.

Marjorie McCoy has written this book with great care and passion. It is good reading, whether or not she inspires you to become a disciple of Frederick Buechner. And what is this book—tribute, biography,

---

literary apologetic? See for yourself and enjoy.

Robert Linstrand
St. Peter's Lutheran Church
Audubon, Minnesota

THOMAS AQUINAS AND GABRIEL BIEL: INTERPRETATIONS OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS IN GERMAN NOMINALISM ON THE EVE OF THE REFORMATION, by John L. Farthing. Durham: Duke University Press, 1988. Pp. 265. $22.50.

Why undertake a study of Gabriel Biel's interpretation of Thomas Aquinas's writings in the late medieval period? That was the first question I asked as I took John Farthing's contribution to the Duke Monograph Series in Medieval and Renaissance Studies in hand. I discovered that there are at least three reasons for such a study. First, it is helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of Biel, the patriarch of German nominalism on the eve of the Reformation and, indirectly, a teacher of Luther. Given the more apparent eclectic nature of Biel, it is most

useful to understand his use of those sources which were available to him and significant enough to require his attention. Thomas Aquinas was certainly one such source. Secondly, Thomas's thought is so significant for the Western Christian thought that it is important for us to see how his thought was understood and interpreted by all those who took him seriously, of whom Biel was one. Thirdly, and perhaps the most significant for Luther scholars, it is important to examine the possible late medieval theological sources influential in Luther's own theological development. Given Luther's rejection of Thomas along with all scholasticism and Biel as evident in the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology,* Thomas's writings must be regarded as having some influence on Luther. The question then is: In what way did Luther receive Thomas's writings? How were they transmitted to him? Studies have shown that most of what Luther knew of Thomas was received indirectly through Biel's use of Thomas in his own writings. This being the case, it would be quite beneficial for such research to examine how Biel understood Thomas and how accurate was his interpretation of Thomas to later generations of students. Although the study does not directly attempt to answer the question of how Luther dealt with Biel's interpretation of Thomas, it most certainly provides a significant amount of data for such a study. Instead, Farthing looks at Biel's interpretation of Thomas as a topic worthy of study on its own merit.

Farthing's method of inquiry is a four-step one. He combs Biel's major writings, the *Expositio canonis missae* and the *Collectorum,* seeking out those points of contact where Biel makes use of Thomas's writings by either a direct quote or reference to those writings. The endnote recitations of the relevant Latin texts were particularly helpful in following his analysis. Next, he critically evaluates how accurate Biel is in transmitting what Thomas wrote. Then Farthing analyzes Biel's own understanding of what Thomas is saying (an interpretative analysis). Finally, comparing Biel's interpretation of Thomas with Biel's own theological thought concerning the same topic, Farthing attempts to show the theological relationship between them. In the final analysis, Farthing portrays Biel as having a great deal more respect for and agreement with Thomas than previously thought. In fact, Farthing makes a very good case for seeing Biel as a synthesist who quite often, so as not to totally reject Thomas, attempts to resolve any theological conflict or contradictions between Thomas and William Occam by seeking a harmony between them.

There is disagreement pointed out between Biel and Thomas. Yet Farthing discerns the conflict to be one usually involving Thomas's rationalistic theological method rather than the theological conclusions drawn. Quite often, Biel is shown to agree with Thomas's conclusion (*opinio*) but disagree with the avenue by which he arrived at it (*ratio*)! It seems that Thomas's use of reason for theological speculation and discourse was too threatening to Biel's voluntarism which sought to protect God's ultimate freedom and power.

On the whole, Farthing finds Biel quite responsible in his presentation of Thomas's

thought. However, he does find Biel to misrepresent Thomas in several key areas which, ironically, were also areas of contention in the birth of Reformation theology, i.e., the doctrine of grace, justification, and the sacraments. These particular discussions were found to be especially helpful in my own Luther studies.

Farthing covers a variety of theological subjects in the study, devoting a chapter to each

of the following: the doctrine of God, Christology and Mariology, the human condition, ethics, ministry and worship, the sacraments, justification, and eschatology. Of these chapters, the discussions on ethics (particularly social and political theory), the sacraments and justification proved to be the most insightful and helpful.

This contribution to Duke's Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance studies is not for those unfamiliar with the late medieval theological traditions as little introductory material is provided. However, for anyone who is engaged in study at the seminary or graduate level in the area of Medieval and/or Reformation studies this book is a must for your reading list. The conclusions Farthing sets forth and the questions he raises must be dealt with in any study of Biel, Luther, or Thomas.

Gary A. Mann
Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity, Wildwood, New Jersey
Stockton State College, Pomona, New Jersey

THE EUCHARIST, by Alexander Schmemann. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988. Pp. 245. $9.95 (paper).

In his introduction Father Schmemann insists that in this book he is not providing a complete or systematic study of the divine liturgy but a series of reflections on the Eucharist, the result of thirty years of experience as an Orthodox priest and theologian. His acknowledgment that these essays do not come from scientific analysis (9) proves to be a recommendation of their worth rather than a suggestion of their limitation, for it is his contention that the school theology characteristic of the Latin church and aped by Orthodoxy has poorly served the church in its self-understanding. It abstraction from the *lex credendi,* the actual worship life of the community, has helped produce what he deems a chronic eucharistic crisis in the church. While nothing in the tradition has changed, the perception of the Eucharist has altered drastically. For Father Schmemann, this very fixedness of the tradition, which is often perceived by Orthodoxy's critics as its greatest problem, is what gives the church hope for renewed health.

> ...it can be said without exaggeration that we live in a frightening and spiritually dangerous age....It is frightening above all because it is characterized by a mounting rebellion against God and his kingdom. Not God, but man has become the measure of all things. Not faith, but ideology and utopian escapism are determining the spiritual state of the world. At a certain point, western Christianity accepted this point of view: almost at once one or another "theology of liberation" was born. Issues relating to economics, politics and psychology have replaced a Christian vision of the world at the service of God. (9-10)

It is Father Schmemann's goal in this book to remind his readers that the crisis of Christian identity in contemporary society requires neither reform nor modernization but a return to that vision and experience which have constituted the life of the church from the very beginning. This treasure remains preserved by Orthodoxy in its liturgy, waiting for the faithful once again to understand it aright.

One need not accept Father Schmemann's blanket dismissal of the various movements of

liberation or all of his accusations against Western Christian theology to derive much of value and interest from his study. Indeed, his critique of theological method that abstracts from or neglects the totality of the church's worship is insightful. He argues that it has contributed to the degeneration of the effective symbols of the Eucharist into mere illustrative symbolism. The exclusive focus on the canon has limited the sacramental action in the minds of Christians and distracted them with questions of secondary import.

> It was no accident, of course, that the chief focus of interest in the sacraments for western theology was not their essence and content but rather the conditions and "modi" of their accomplishment and "efficacy." Thus, the interpretation of the eucharist revolves around the question of the method and moment of the transformation of the gifts, their conversion into the body and blood of Christ, but with almost no mention of the meaning of this transformation for the Church, for the world, for each of us. As much as it may seem paradoxical, "interest" in the *real presence* of the body and blood of Christ replaces "interest" in Christ. (67-8)

This narrowness in turn has led to a kind of sacramental minimalism—what conditions must be met on the part of celebrant and worshipper for the transaction to take place—rather than generating an ever-growing thirst for fullness in the communicants.

Father Schmemann insists that no one part of the liturgy can be singled out as the essence of the Eucharist. Rather, the sacramental reality occurs through the whole, as the church moves step by step into the Kingdom of our Lord (and it is noteworthy that he perceives the liturgy in terms of the ascent of the church to heaven rather than of the descent of Christ to the altar). Thus, he examines in order the sacrament of the assembly, of the Kingdom, of entrance, of the Word, of the faithful, of offering, of unity, of anaphora, of thanksgiving, of remembrance, of the Holy Spirit, and of communion. In keeping with his claim that the Eucharist is the center and culmination of the church's life, Father Schmemann cannot discuss it without unfolding many aspects of Orthodox belief. His eloquent, at moments even lyrical, expression of the Orthodox vision offers a solid and succinct initiation into the character of this community. His criticisms of contemporary Orthodox eucharistic understanding and practice offer a challenge to all concerned about the sacrament in Christian communities of whatever confessional allegiance.

Jane E. Strohl
Luther Northwestern Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota

THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, by Leon Morris. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988. Pp. 578. $29.95.

The Epistle to the Romans holds its place as one of the greatest Christian writings. It is the longest of Paul's letters (about 7,100 words) and it is not an easy book to understand. Leon Morris, formerly Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia, has undertaken to add to the rich store of commentaries on this key letter. He has written a work that is readable and lucid,

what a commentary ought to be.

The Introduction covers thirty-one pages of text, including such standard features as discussions of authorship, date, occasion, and the like, together with some comments on the shorter edition of the letter (e.g., did it end at 14:23?), and the destination of chapter 16 (was it originally part of Romans? or was it sent to Ephesus?). Morris opts for the longer edition, including chapter 16 as an integral part of the Epistle.

The exposition of the text of Romans is marked by a format helpful to various kinds of readers. The comments are free-flowing in style, logically developed, and well illustrated by cross-referencing to other biblical texts ("Scripture interprets Scripture") or to the remarks of sundry commentators.

While the Greek text of Romans is the basis for the exposition, the writer supplies the NIV text for each unit, and places Greek words and more technical comments in the footnotes. There are several "Additional Notes" which provide comments on key themes in Romans 1-3 ("The Righteousness of God"; "Truth"; "The Law in Romans"; "Justification"; "Judgment"; "Sin").

When controversial points arise Morris normally gives a sampling of various approaches but does not leave the readers suspended in confusion. He usually expresses his preference, with reasons attached, maintaining a gentle spirit. Occasional felicities of expression arrest the reader's attention, e.g., "Now we have the other side of the coin"; "Parry's comment hits the mark"; or, "But Paul does not always pay attention to grammatical niceties."

One of the obvious problems in structur-

---

ing the letter (his analysis is on pp. 33-34) is the relation of chapter 5 to what precedes and follows. Morris divides 1:18-5:21 ("The Way of Deliverance") from 6:1-8:39 ("The Way of Godliness"). His basic argument for his position is that in the former unit Paul is explaining how God justifies sinners, whereas in the latter he is showing the way the justified persons should live (cf. Gal 5:13). This analysis differs from a number of recent arrangements. Cranfield divides 1:18-4:25 from 5:1-8:39 (emphasizing "righteousness revealed" from "the new life"); Käsemann and Harrisville see three main divisions: 1:18-3:20; 3:21-4:25; 5:1-8:39; whereas Achtemeier breaks 1:1-4:22 ("the past") from 4:23-8:39 ("the present").

In his discussion Morris wrestles with crucial passages, such as 5:12-21. He devotes a good amount of space to an analysis of the grammar of Paul's expression "because all sinned" (5:22 NIV), admitting "the Greek construction is difficult." Both the force of the prepositional phrase *eph' ho* ("because") and the verb *hemarton* ("sinned," aorist tense) are scrutinized in both text and footnotes. He shows that one's decision on the grammar of the text has profound effects upon the theology that grows out of the passage, viz., whether "all sin" (habitually and culpably), or whether "all sinned" (i.e., "in Adam"), pointing to the original act and thus rendering all sinners by nature. The whole race, therefore, "is somehow caught up in Adam's sin." This conclusion then points toward the necessity of "the grace of God and the free gift of righteousness" to reverse the effect of Adam's sin.

Morris also calls attention to the pattern in Romans of beginning with a strong doctrinal section (1-11) and following with an exhortation to live out one's Christian faith (12:1-15:13). He calls this pattern "a Pauline distinctive" (it has been pointed out that it does not occur in Peter

or John). The impact of this arrangement is to show that the life of the Christian is to be based upon the foundation of the doctrines of the gospel. Romans 12:1-15:13 illustrates how the principle of justification by faith in what God has done in Christ makes possible the ethical character of Christian living. Sacrifice of the body (12:1), renewal of the mind (12:2), and sober judgement concerning one's self (12:3) are foundational to living out the new life.

What is the main strength of the commentary? Probably Morris's care in defining and explaining Paul's terminology and thought, and giving the reader a breadth of scholarly insights. One senses a freshness about the book—the writer has thought deeply on and researched carefully the text of Romans—and a devoutness which shows respect for the character of the message of the Epistle.

The work is that of a Christian scholar—proceeding from the study desk—rather than that of a pastor. Thus, the book should be supplemented with other helps which delve deeply into the current life of the church in the world and which make various applications of the Good News.

Walter McGregor Dunnett
Northwestern College
St. Paul, Minnesota

THE BOOK OF JOB, by John Hartley. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988. Pp. 605. $26.95.

Every age is, in a sense, a "Jobian" age. The existential questions prompted by Nietzsche or Kierkegaard strike a universal chord when refracted through the story of the suffering of Job. Every age, I suspect, envisions itself in some regard as positioned on the precipice of disaster, and though striving to master its own fate and fortune feels itself out of control and spinning madly toward utter chaos. Greenhouse effect, acid rain, ozone depletion, massive oil spills, unmanaged population explosion, social disintegration, AIDS, and a host of other overwhelming problems of cosmic proportions lead us to experience Job's life in its corporate sense—where is God in all of this? The 1985 commentary by J. Gerald Janzen in the Interpretation series as well as this new commentary by Hartley evidence the attraction which the story of Job holds for those familiar with it. We are drawn to Job like moths to a flame, curious to investigate those issues which we know will only singe our wings, irresistibly attracted to those torching issues which yield

a deadly light upon our mortal condition as we come to terms with the madness called "faith."

The *NICOT* series (New International Commentary on the Old Testament) is one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive of the newer "evangelical commentaries." Volumes such as those by Peter Craige on Deuteronomy and J. A. Thompson on Jeremiah establish the fact that evangelical scholarship is by no means to be relegated to the shelves of indifference. The commentary prepared by Hartley on the book of Job follows in the tradition of the series as a whole. It is conversant with the full range of studies on Israel's wisdom tradition and Job, and does not shy away from the difficult questions. His new translation and text-critical work has been particularly influenced by the studies of Edouard Dhorme, Marvin Pope, Mitchell Dahood, Georg Fohrer, and Robert Gordis.

There is a tendency for commentaries in this series, after weighing all the evidence, to choose more conservative opinions. Hartley's commentary is no different in this respect. In discussing the major literary issues of debate in Job studies his conclusions are conservative, balanced and well-centered. He recognizes the marked contradiction between the prologue and epilogue on one hand and the central dialogue on the other. The prologue and epilogue represent an old epic account reworked by the author to serve as a framework for the central dialogue. The third cycle of speeches has evidenced, in the present form of the text, only minor disruption, and for the most part displays creative authorial intention. The Hymn to Wisdom (chapter 28), though possibly added to the final edition, is purposely positioned to prepare the audience for the response by Yahweh. Similarly, the Elihu speeches are an integral part of the final edition, and the differences between his speeches and the others is due to his serving a specific function within the structure of the plot—that of offering comic relief, of providing space for God's continued silence, and of preparing Job to hear what God is about to say. The final Yahweh speeches are not redundant but are in fact coherent and reflect the book's overall affinity to linking items in sets of two, three, and four.

One nice feature of the commentary is its overall structure. Each section or dialogue is introduced by historical and literary considerations, followed by a verse by verse commentary, and is concluded by an insightful paragraph on the theological aim of the passage. The author does not leave the reader swamped in information, but repeatedly draws exegetical insights together into this final paragraph presenting a more wholistic and satisfying reading. Hartley's attention to theological issues, together with his balanced exegetical discussions, make this an excellent commentary.

The one significant feature that was missing was a stated programmatic intent which would provide shape to this work. The work could have been improved with a more carefully detailed discussion of the social *function* of the book of Job as a piece of Israel's wisdom literature. Hartley seems to reduce the function of the book to that of a didactic in faithfulness: to teach that a person may serve God faithfully whatever his circumstances, "for he has the assurance that God is for him, seeking his ultimate good." Such a reductionist view leaves me feeling that there is something much more significant at work than giving simple lessons in how one can live faithfully.

In his introduction Hartley too closely follows the standard issues, and does not give sufficient attention to the question of what sort of literature the book of Job represents and what its relation to Israel's faith tradition is. Apart from a few details in translation, I was not aware of any new ground being broken by this commentary. I appreciated his discussion of the function served by the structure of the three dialogue cycles, but disagreed with his specific conclusions at several key points, of which I shall mention only a few. Hartley is confident that the author "holds to a pure monotheism" in which Satan functions only as God's servant, solely an instrument in the testing. Those two statements do not necessarily follow in logical sequence. It is quite true that Satan functions as a member of the divine council. However, to ascribe "pure monotheism" to the author (especially if

---

dated to the early seventh century, as Hartley suggests) is questionable.

Second, to understand Job's wife as a supportive character who "desperately wanted to

end her husband's pain" and who "spoke out of the strong emotional, marital bond between them" misunderstands the function which she serves in the story. She is a foil, not a noble figure.

Third, to interpret Job's statement in 16:5 to mean that, were they to change places, Job would have been more compassionate and sympathetic than his three friends is contrary to the logical sense of the passage that, if the tables were turned, Job would be able to say *exactly* the same things his friends were saying. Fourth, in one of the central cruxes of the book, Hartley understands the "heavenly redeemer" of whom Job speaks to be God rather than some other figure (cf. both pp. 264 and 293ff.). He is, however, able to parlay this conclusion into his most significant theological insights concerning the dialectical theme of "God against God" (esp. p.295), a theme he ought to have developed much more fully in the introduction.

Finally, Hartley argues that in his final speech Job "surrenders to God the last vestige of his self-righteousness" and "withdraws his avowal of innocence." To draw this conclusion is to undermine what Hartley himself acknowledged to be the central focus precisely upon Job's "integrity" and his holding fast to his "*tumah*" (cf. the discussion of 27:5). Job is admitting his weakness and mortality before God, but is not retracting his integrity. To do so would be unimaginable given the book's focus precisely upon that Jobian sense of integrity which stands fast even in the teeth of God's seeming anger.

But these disagreements are completely swept away in the gratitude due to Hartley for having prepared such a comprehensive and informed commentary, one that will certainly stand alongside those of Pope and Rowley as fundamental to interpreting this most intriguing and beguiling book.

Rodney R. Hutton
Trinity Lutheran Seminary
Columbus, Ohio

HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM: RIGHTS IN CONTEXT, by Steven B. Smith. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. Pp. 251. $29.95.

A. C. M. Ahlen was professor of philosophical theology in the old Northwestern Lutheran Seminary. Those who studied with him in the late '50s were astonished by the man. He was "high church" (bully for the Swedish succession) and "high socialist" (bully for the middle way). He admired "Reason" and commended it to us seminarians. He was the last Melanchthonian in the old United Lutheran Church, disposing of S. Kierkegaard's strictures on critical reason as "absurdities"! Once, when he lectured on the sources for moral judgments in the Roman Catholic "natural law" tradition, I asked about the sources for a Lutheran ethic. He said, "the entire history of ethical thought from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* to the latest from Reinhold Niebuhr." This reply had the sense that although the "natural law" tradition was not to be rejected out of hand, an ethic built on a universal law would be inappropriate to most situations. Because of the heterogeneity of the human condition, it was impossible to specify beforehand what types of rules would be applicable to which situations. Knowledge of the law could not be taught by logic, but only imparted and acquired historically or situationally. Philosophy of law was a practical philosophy. This is the "Lutheran" tradition of reflection I inherited from Ahlen, and it is the reason I read Steven Smith's book, a commentary on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right.*

One more “Lutheran” note before I turn directly to Smith’s work. The influence of Aristotle was mediated to Hegel by Melanchthon’s commentaries on the *Politics.* In the Lutheran universities of Europe, Aristotle was the ethical philosopher from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. A. C. M. would have enjoyed this book of Smith’s. He would have been surprised about Hegel’s rehabilitation as a serious political thinker in the university today.

This is the value of Smith’s volume. Smith, associate professor of political science at Yale, shows us how Hegel’s thought has been rescued and revived by a new

---

generation of political thinkers who are grappling with the problems presented by traditional ideologies. The genesis of many of the criticisms of liberalism being made today—its abstract methodology, its excessive concern with private nonpolitical goods, and its insensitivity to public issues of citizenship and public virtue—are articulated in the philosophy of Hegel. Early modern social contract methodologies presupposed an “atomistic” conception of the self as bereft of all cultural and historical attachments and conceived of the state as an enforcement mechanism for the maintenance of private rights. Instead of rejecting this position outright, Smith argues, Hegel reformulated classic liberalism, preserving what was of value while rendering it more attentive to the dynamics of human history and the developmental structure of the moral personality.

Liberal government, Hegel reasoned, is neither a gift of nature nor the product of solitary intellectual reflection. Rather, it is the result of a long and arduous historical process that has culminated in the modern constitutional state. As Smith points out, however, Hegel did value liberalism’s emphasis on the rule of law and was skeptical of attempts to create some kind of egalitarian community. His goal, Smith suggests, was to find a way of incorporating both the ancient emphasis on the dignity and even architectonic character of political life with the modern concern for freedom, rights, and mutual recognition.

This then is the central feature of Hegel’s theory of the state, its respect for the freedom of the individual as a precondition for the enjoyment of all other social goods. Family and society and the state are not just conservative restraints on freedom but the necessary context with which our individual powers and capacities can grow and develop. The institutions of ethical life are there to preserve and enhance freedom.

Of interest to Lutheran clergy must be the fact that Hegel’s ideas correspond to the classical Lutheran position (from article 16 of the Augsburg Confession) that family, state, and church constitute the three divine institutions within which the Christian life must realize itself. The various duties inherent in each institution shape the Christian conception of ethical righteousness. This argument from Lutheranism’s greatest philosopher should be of interest to modern clergy who are calling for a revival of interest in the state as a central concept orienting political life.

Smith has written a compelling book. He moves with ease from the obscurer controversies of Hegelian logic to more generally accessible political and practical concerns. His prose is lucid and the conversation with Hegel and Hegel’s interpreters lively. It’s a good read.

Richard Q. Elvee
Gustavus Adolphus College
St. Peter, Minnesota

THEOLOGY FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM: AN ECUMENICAL VIEW, by Hans Küng. New York: Doubleday, 1988. Pp. 316. $24.95.

Predictions about the future increasingly occupy the attention of contemporary theologians. To this spate of prognostications, Hans Küng contributes *Theology for the Third Millennium,* an attempt to "lay an ecumenical foundation" for the postmodern age. A collection of eleven essays, most of which have appeared before, the structure of the book instantiates Küng's conviction that we must first resolve several long-standing conflicts before we can look at the future and consider the development of a global theology.

Accordingly, the first part of the book surveys some classical disagreements within the Christian household. Küng reviews the trouble between Erasmus and Luther, illuminates their weaknesses, and suggests an approach that blends the best of each, namely, Luther's prophetic power and Erasmus' peaceful openness. In three chapters, the author tackles the problem of the place and interpretation of the Bible. He suggests its primacy for theology, the need for an historico-critical approach, and a mix of Catholic breadth and Protestant focus in correcting past errors.

In the four chapters of the second part, Küng outlines a critical ecumenical theology for postmodern times. Borrowing from Thomas Kuhn, the author argues that we are at an epochal threshold that calls for a

---

paradigm change in theology. The current crisis in theology, discussed at the 1983 International Ecumenical Symposium, requires a new way of understanding or seeing, a new model of interpretation, that is nevertheless continuous with the tradition. Turning on the two poles of God's revelation and human experience, contemporary theology must be truthful, free, critical, and ecumenical. As well, it should be lucid, open, interdisciplinary, dialogical, current, and Christian. The new theology demanded by our time will be at once Catholic and Protestant, traditional and contemporary, Christocentric and ecumenical, and theoretical and practical. This "slow-ripening paradigm of a critical ecumenical theology" is the answer to the "foundational crisis" faced by theology today.

Noting that we have ample information about the world religions, but little critical analysis, Küng offers, in his third section, some notes toward a theology of world religions. Arguing that the major religions are paradigms in themselves, Küng illustrates the way religions change by drawing a brief sketch of the development of Buddhism. The fact of different "constellations" of meaning among the religions raises the question of the truthfulness of their claims. Küng reviews four typical postures of interreligious dialogue, and offers his own criterion, namely, a religion is true if it enhances and perfects human nature. This general ethical criterion must be coupled with the specifically religious norms of each of the particular religions in assessing their truthfulness. A final chapter is devoted to Karl Barth, who, Küng says, opened the way to a postmodern ecumenical theology, but did not complete it.

Even though this book is a collection of essays written at different times, and, therefore, contains some duplication and alack of cohesive development, it is unified by the author's own spirit. It well displays Küng's passion for reform, his style of integrating other theologies into his work, and his commitment to a world theology. At the same time, it is a fine illustration of the

“via media” characteristic of his approach. Küng suggests we need something of the methods of both Erasmus and Luther. His approach to the Bible takes its historical context seriously, but does not lapse into reductionism. Küng wants both God’s revelation and human experience as leaven in the theological loaf. His ecumenical theology embraces both unity within Christendom and better understanding among the world religions. His attempt to revalorize Catholic theology lifts up the themes of evangelical theology while praising the values of Vatican II. Even as he struggles to enlighten the Enlightenment, Küng holds out the possibility of a “rationally responsible” faith. In all this, Küng is a reasonable radical who would have us enter the year 2000 with the best we can salvage from a Christianity in crisis. One could do far worse in searching for some helpful theological direction for the way ahead.

Jerry K. Robbins
Lutheran Campus Center
Morgantown, West Virginia