REVIEWS

Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation
M. Douglas Meeks, ed.
Nashville: Kingswood,
2004, 200 pp., paper, 2004, $30.00
Reviewed by William J. Abraham

These essays bring together the most important lectures at the Eleventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies. Splendidly edited by M. Douglas Meeks, they provide a snapshot of Methodist theology at a global level. The central theme is that of new creation. The opening essay by Maddox provides the theological foundations by arguing that Wesley’s theological development offers a trajectory that climaxes with a pronounced turn to eschatology. We have in Wesley a way of moving from new birth and sanctification to socioeconomic and cosmic dimensions of God’s work of new creation. This vision provides a conceptual bridge to all the essays that follow. Nestor O. Miguez reaches back into the biblical foundations; Russell Richey explores the theme of Methodism itself as a form of new creation; Mary Elizabeth Moore develops an updating of the tradition on repentance, reparation, and reconciliation; Jong Chun Park connects the Wesleyan tradition on perfection with Confucian sage learning; Josiah U. Young III explores the this-worldly character of new creation; Manfred Marquardt relates the coming of the kingdom to global society; and Mvume Dundale rounds off the book with a fine case study connecting mission to ecological challenges.

Every essay in this volume is extremely well crafted. Together they show how Wesleyan themes connect with contemporary theological issues. It is precisely this virtue that exposes the deep problem below the surface. One way to express the difficulty is to note how contorted the interpretation of Wesley becomes. Thus Maddox systematically plays down the instantaneous dimensions of sanctification; he overplays the concept of responsible grace; the trajectory he finds in Wesley is a cherry-picking of the sources; and the three sermons offered as warrant for the turn to eschatology in the late Wesley provide no evidence for this claim. Readers can check this out for
themselves by reading “The General Spread of the Gospel” (1783), “The Signs of the Times” (1787), and “Of Former Times” (1787). The problem resurfaces when we reverse direction. The Wesleyan content of many of these papers is really a set of abstractions that are wrenched from the original context to which they belong. Wesley becomes the court chaplain to contemporary social and political proposals that are driven by disparate if not alien sources; Wesley provides legitimacy to a vision of theology that we might call liberation lite. The exception to this is the paper by Richey. Here one hears the heartbeat of early Methodism pounding through the practices and institutions invented to mediate the power of the gospel.

For thirty years the Oxford Institute has systematically explored a liberationist reading of Wesley. Other readings have been marginalized or suppressed. We need a radical change of orientation if we are to make progress in the next generation.

For Further Reading:

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Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places
Eugene H. Peterson
2005, xii, 368 pp. cloth, $25.00
Reviewed by Elaine A. Heath

Eugene Peterson’s newest volume is a welcome contribution to the growing body of contemporary literature in spiritual theology. (Spiritual theology is the systematic study of the Christian life.) Peterson aims to provide a thoroughly biblical, trinitarian, christocentric matrix for spiritual theology. While today’s American religious landscape teems with interest in spirituality, much of the conversation is poorly defined, with some being downright pagan. Peterson takes the bull by the horns: “I want to harness these contemporary but imprecise spirituality energies in biblical leather
and direct them in entering the company of Jesus in preparation for joining the actual “play” of Christ in creation, history, and community” (13).

The book is organized under the three rubrics of Christ playing in creation, history and community, inspired by Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “As Kingfishers Catch Fire.” Each section begins with an introduction to the “neighborhood” for the conversation. Next the author identifies the kerygmatic event announcing the work of Christ in that neighborhood (Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection). The primary threat to the kerygma is then described, these being gnosticism, moralism, and sectarianism. Two “grounding” biblical texts provide theological resources in response to the threat. The final section of each unit explores practical ways to cultivate the Christian life in light of the preceding discussion.

With the exegetical skills that have endeared him to many, Peterson creates with carefully chosen creation narratives a strong foundation for spiritual theology. He also draws widely from the classics of Christian spirituality, theology, and literature. Vignettes from his childhood and many years of service in pastoral ministry bring an earthy realism to the text.

Peterson delivers a sharp critique of clergy on several points. For example he laments the loss of Sunday as Sabbath, a contemplative day of not-working and not-talking that has become a day choked with work, talk, committee meetings, and other non-worship gatherings (117). He chides the sectarianism that is ever “crouching at the door” in churches and denominations, calling it “termites in the Father’s house” and “a front for narcissism” (244). The misuse of power by spiritual leaders is “blasphemy” (272), he reminds us. Later on in his discussion of the seduction of secular power and money, he notes that Jesus and Paul exhibited a “detached indifference” to the kind of powerful, moneyed people so many pastors try to recruit (295).

Having set out to “harness...imprecise spirituality energies in biblical leather,” Peterson has indeed provided a solid, systematic approach to spiritual theology that is distinctly biblical theology. At the same time he draws creatively and effectively from many Christian spiritual traditions, creating an ecumenical resource that will be valued by a theologically diverse readership. Pastors of all denominations would benefit from and be challenged by Peterson’s insights. The book is also a fine resource for classes in spiritual theology and Christian spiritual formation.

For Further Reading:

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**The Evangelical Moment: The Promise of an American Religion**

By Kenneth J. Collins

*Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press*

2005, 288 pp., paper, $22.99

Reviewed by Nathan Crawford

In the book, *The Evangelical Moment*, Kenneth J. Collins is trying to add a new voice to the contemporary dialogue as to what constitutes evangelicalism and what evangelicalism actually looks like. Collins is trying to add the voice of someone coming from the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition, adding a much needed complement to an area that is often dominated by voices from the Reformed tradition.

Collins begins his book by showing the beliefs that are central to evangelicalism — the authority of Scripture, the necessity of conversion, the atonement of Christ, and a primacy on evangelism. Collins then goes through the history of evangelicalism and shows how it is constantly a movement of reform. The idea that evangelicalism is constantly a movement of reform is central to Collins’ book because Collins’ believes the only way to understand evangelicalism is to look at how evangelicalism dialogs with the rest of Christianity. Next, Collins shows how his Wesleyan voice adds to the conversation. An example of this is how Collins shows the distinction between the Bible being inerrant in all things, and then the Wesleyan distinction which believes the Bible is inerrant in all things relating to soteriology.

The next part of the book consists of Collins showing who the dialogue partners of evangelicalism are. He then proceeds to dialogue with these people. First, Collins begins by moderating the conversation between evangelical theology and some currents of contemporary nonfoundational theology — mostly postliberalism and postmodernism. Collins criticizes postliberalism on the grounds that it places too much emphasis on narrative and he fears that by embracing postmodernism, evangelicalism will give up the idea of the gospel as a metanarrative. In the next chapters he deals with evangelicalism as it relates to politics, poverty, and feminism. Essentially,
Collins wants to keep evangelicalism politically conservative on the issues of politics and poverty while embracing a more moderate position in relation to feminism. Lastly, this part of the book dialogues with theological liberals and Roman Catholics. Against theological liberals, Collins voices his concern over their putting the supreme authority in experience over Scripture and tradition. He then criticizes the Roman Church for putting too much emphasis on tradition without being critical of tradition.

The third part of the book offers a place for evangelicalism to go forward. Collins, in drawing from Robert Webber, is asking for an “ancient-future faith.” Essentially, Collins calls for a dialogue between the tradition of Christianity and contemporary Christianity. He also calls for this dialogue to extend between evangelicalism, Roman Catholicism, and theological liberalism. Collins also proposes some places where evangelicalism can improve. One is in the place of recovering a more sacramental view of preaching, hoping to improve preaching in evangelical churches. Collins also, in calling for dialogue, calls for unity in disagreements, realizing that all partners belong to the one church of Jesus Christ and thus, all should share some common ground upon which to have dialogue.

I have two critiques for the book however. The first is that Collins tends to deal with caricatures of people and positions rather than actually dealing with the positions. A prime example of this is in Collins’ criticism of postmodernism. In his criticism he lists Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida as its main culprits, but we only get a small quote from Lyotard. We hear nothing from Foucault or Derrida, even though they differ from Lyotard and each other, and they are not even listed in the bibliography. It seems to me that Collins criticizes common conceptions (or misconceptions) instead of criticizing the actual work of people.

I also want to criticize Collins on his choice of dialogue partners. He consistently picks theological liberalism and Roman Catholicism. However, he does not really dialogue with Eastern Orthodoxy, which has become a strong force in Christianity since the fall of Iron Curtain. Also, Collins does not try to engage, or even call for, a dialogue with other religions. It seems to me though, that this will become an increasing need for evangelicalism in a religiously pluralistic world.

Overall, Collins’ book is an excellent read upon which to base an understanding of evangelicalism. It adds a much needed perspective to counter the dominant Reformed perspective. Lastly though, this book should be read because it can foster dialogue among the evangelical community as to how to reform itself and to keep being the reformation voice to the rest of the Universal Church.

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Theology as History and Hermeneutics: A Post-Critical Evangelical Conversation with Contemporary Theology
Laurence W. Wood
Lexington: Eerdmans Publisher
Reviewed by Nathan Crawford

Laurence W. Wood, in this book, is trying to forge a way for evangelical theology to progress through the postmodern milieu. This is essentially because Wood believes that theology must be actively engaged connecting the message of the Gospel to its culture. Thus, the task of theology is to forge a dialogue between faith and culture. This is what Wood attempts to do throughout this book. He does this by trying to set the parameters for what would be an evangelical, post-critical theology. Wood makes a conscious choice to use the term “post-critical” instead of “postmodern” because the term “postmodern” tends to have too many connotations and misrepresentations. Thus, he appropriates “post-critical” from Michael Polanyi, using the term to connote a theology that “moves beyond the ‘critical philosophy’ of Kant without abandoning the importance of criticism (viii),” valuing a synthesis of reason and history. This moves post-critical theology into a place where non-foundationalism and dialogue become key.

Wood spends the first part of the book dealing with the idea of revelation. He is trying to forge a way to understand revelation within the post-critical culture in which we live. This also means that he, as a theologian, must adequately engage the culture in dialogue with his faith. In doing this, he comes to see Wolfhart Pannenberg’s use of universal history and salvation history as key. What Pannenberg does (along with others like Cullmann and Wright) is to show that reason and faith are not diametrically opposed, but can work in tandem with each other. In doing this though, Pannenberg remains anti-foundational and emphasizes the idea that ideas are historically contingent. This keeps Pannenberg thoroughly post-critical. Truth then, in Pannenberg’s system, is “relational, historical, and salvific (95).” Basically, for Pannenberg, truth is found in the meaning of an event that arises out of the context in which it happens. Basically, an event happens and the meaning of the event comes from the interpretation of the event by the historical people around the event.

This leads Wood to discuss hermeneutics. Here, Wood appropriates the work of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur follows Heidegger in seeing that there is not a hard-and-fast distinction between subject and object, but sees their inherent relationality. This leads Ricoeur to suggest that the meaning of a text is found in what it contributes to one’s existence. For Wood, this really culminates in Ricoeur’s idea of testimony. Basically, Ricoeur sees the giving
of testimony as an interpretation - a witness gives testimony as to how he/she perceived (perception is found in lived experience) a certain event and as to how that event affected his/her life. This means that the probability of an event and the way it affects a person’s life leads the way to truth. The probable is found in a “struggle of opinions” which helps lead to a probable truth. Thus, for Wood, this leads to understanding the Christian faith less as propositional truths and more as lived experience that one gives testimony to.

This all leads Wood to synthesize salvation history and hermeneutics. He says that salvation history is the lived experience by which theology should judge truth. He sees this in the dialectic of the hermeneutical validation of faith – which comes through lived experience – and the verification of the faith in Jesus becoming the Christ – which comes through the study of history and its subsequent interpretation.

My main constructive comment relates to Wood’s use of Hauerwas in the chapter “Postliberal Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology.” It seems that Wood uses Hauerwas more to criticize his views on homosexuality than to show an example of how narrative theology works. Also, it seems like the same thing happens in the chapter “Postmodern Hermeneutics, Ideological Criticism, and Liberation Theologies.” It seems as though Wood fundamentally disagrees with liberation theology and so, picks up on some of the glaring weaknesses (from an evangelical perspective) to critique. Instead, I would have like to see Wood critically appropriate some of the criticisms that liberation theologies make against evangelical theology and how they further a post-critical theology.

Overall, this book is very good and is a must read for students doing evangelical theology in a post-critical world. Wood does a great job explaining the different theologies, simplifying them without making them simplistic. He also deals with the major people in Protestant theology at the moment, which means that the reader will become aware of those people that are shaping theology today. Essentially though, I recommend this book because it gives a place to begin the theological task — a place where hermeneutics and salvation history are key.

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Resistance and Theological Ethics
Ronald H. Stone and Robert L. Stivers, eds.
Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers
2004, vi, 334 pp. paper, $28.95
Reviewed by Joerg Rieger

This book is a collection of essays by the “Theological Educators for Presbyterian Social Witness,” a group of ethicists based in the United States. The essays were originally presented in 1999 and some have been updated to take into account the current situation and the significant changes that have occurred since then.

The topic of resistance has gained urgency in recent years. The group is to be commended not only for dealing with it but also for pointing out historical parallels. As Ronald Stone demonstrates in the introduction and in his own chapter, the Reformed tradition has its own history of resistance, which cannot be limited to religion alone. Moreover, throughout the Christian tradition and with deep roots in the Hebrew Bible and the prophets, many strands of resistance can be identified that are particularly relevant to our own times. Jesus himself, we learn in the introduction, “encouraged confrontations with oppressors” (2). Other chapters broaden this horizon further, adding resources of resistance from the New Testament, Augustine, African-American struggles against slavery, and the resistance of Korean women.

What is to be resisted? The group identifies various issues, including diverse manifestations of globalization, devastation of the environment, nationalism, harmful tendencies in biotechnology, and militarism. This is a formidable list, as each of these issues has already demonstrated its potential to do great harm. Bringing these discussions back into the heart of Christian discourse will not be easy—most of these issues have been relegated to what are often seen as “special interest groups” interested in “social concerns”—but this is perhaps one of the contributions that this book could make. In this regard, various attempts to talk about the theological concept of sin are on the right track.

In light of the importance of the topic of this book, however, a few things remain to be clarified. While Christianity offers resources of resistance, Christianity itself has often joined forces with powers that need to be resisted. Only the final essay by Edward LeRoy Long Jr. explores this problem. This issue needs more attention yet, not only in regard to inexcusable Christian support for clearly oppressive systems (for slavery and fascism, for instance) but also in regard to well-meaning Christian support for systems that we consider mostly benign because we are unable to see the suffering and death that they cause.

Furthermore, we need a clearer understanding of what we are up against.
Some essays, including the one by co-editor Robert Stivers, do not fully clarify whether the problem is mainly one of moral failure and distortion or whether the problem is part of the system itself. For instance, while efforts to hold transnational corporations morally accountable cannot hurt, is there something in the system itself that needs to be resisted? Is the growing gap between rich and poor that is noted by several authors mainly a matter of moral failure (even the term “consumerism” seems to point to a moral problem because we might decide not to participate) or is it an essential part of how the system operates?

If we pursue the deeper theological question of sin (religious pride, greed, violence, and domination are named in the introduction and are good places to start, but what about less visible forms of coercion exercised for instance by policies of “development” and the milder forms of violence and domination of the 1990s?), we might become clearer about God’s own resistance in turn.

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**The Ripple Church: Multiply Your Ministry by Parenting New Churches.**

**Phil Stevenson**

*Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House*


Reviewed by J.D. Payne

Stevenson’s work has filled-in a substantial gap in church planting literature. Scan the bookstores and you will find that the overwhelming majority of church planting books are designed specifically for the individual church planter. Stevenson, however, has produced an easy-to-read work that is more for the established church. Designed to motivate, encourage, and offer some practical steps, this work seeks to lead churches to become church multiplying churches or what he calls, “ripple churches.” While serving as a senior pastor in the Wesleyan tradition, Stevenson led two congregations to plant seven churches. Currently, he is a senior consultant and coach with New Church Specialties.

Peppered with much illustrative material of personal stories, it is easy to see that this work was born out of Stevenson’s ministerial experience. Consisting of thirteen chapters and several appendices, *The Ripple Church is a*
practical resource for church leaders. Chapters one and two discuss Stevenson’s journey into the ministry of church planting and the biblical roots for this ministry. Chapter three describes church planting as the most effective form of evangelism. It is here Stevenson addresses the reasons why new churches reach more people for Christ than most established churches. Chapter four addresses the numerous models of church planting. In chapter five, Stevenson addresses the barriers that prevent churches from effectively participating in church planting. Here he explains that both the pastor and the people must be willing to make the necessary sacrifices. Chapters six and seven explain the need to foresee and strategize to overcome church planting obstacles and when a church should not plant churches. In chapters eight and nine Stevenson discusses the details of leading one’s church into church planting and the concept of financing this type of ministry. Healthy church planting teams and proper leadership are discussed in chapters ten and eleven. Chapter twelve addresses the various issues of consideration when working with a denomination. Finally, the author concludes the book with a chapter revealing seven examples of “ripple” churches.

There are numerous strengths to this work, more than space will allow me to address. First, Stevenson shows that the New Testament pattern for global disciplmaking is that of planting churches that will multiply themselves throughout the world. He rightly reveals that it is unhealthy for leaders to see Kingdom growth only in terms of the numerical growth of their one congregation. Second, in light of the fact that many denominations offer the most praise to their largest congregations solely due to their size, Stevenson challenges denominational leaders to encourage, applaud, and reward church multiplication, even among smaller churches. Third, Stevenson emphasizes the vital role of the pastor in church planting. The pastor must first own the vision. According to Stevenson, “Without realizing it, he or she may be the first obstacle to church multiplication” (66).

There are a couple of minor concerns that I have with the book. First, the author seems to be too optimistic about the ability of denominations to adjust their structures if a church multiplication movement occurs. Referring to denominational leaders, Stevenson wrote, “Yet they will be amazed to see how quickly the organization can adapt and change when it needs to keep pace with a genuine movement of the Holy Spirit” (148-49). Both historically and missiologically speaking, these types of movements usually occur outside the established churches. Second, Stevenson’s description of the non-competitive attitude of “the ripple church,” seems to be more of a theoretical concept than reality. He noted, “The multiplication of churches in a given area does not pose a threat to any one of them [churches]. Neighboring churches are not competitors but comrades” (154). Though I agree with Stevenson’s premise, I know from experience that unfortunately
many churches are turfish and competitive with other churches.

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**The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture**  
**Brevard S. Childs**  
2004, xii, 332pp. casebound, $35.00  
Reviewed by John N. Oswalt

Without question Brevard Childs will go down as one of the most productive Old Testament scholars in the last half of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st. Nor are Childs’ contributions merely numerous; they are also unfailingly substantive. The present volume can only add to that reputation. Beginning with the New Testament’s appropriation of the book of Isaiah, Childs follows the trail of Isaianic interpretation from Justin Martyr in the 2nd Christian century to Walter Brueggemann in the 21st. Along the way it seems that almost no Christian who ever wrote on the book of Isaiah (with important exceptions noted below) is neglected. Furthermore, Childs is not only familiar with those who wrote about Isaiah, but also with those who wrote about the ones who wrote! The result is truly impressive.

Childs traces in great detail the early church’s effort to make the Old Testament a Christian book through the medium of spiritualizing. He also shows how the early interpreters capitalized on every part of Isaiah that could possibly have a Christological meaning. To his credit, he does not merely dismiss these efforts as the unfortunate errors of those who did not know better, but treats them sensitively and seriously. He moves on to the Renaissance and the Reformation in which it came to be understood that it was not necessary to depart from “the plain sense” of the Old Testament to arrive at a fully Christian understanding of it. He then brings the study up to the early 20th century showing the impact of the emergence of critical studies upon the interpretation of the prophet.

In all of this, Childs purports to find a common thread of interpretation. This common thread is composed of three elements: 1) careful attention to the literal sense of the text, 2) intense wrestling with the theological content of the Old Testament, 3) a profound commitment to the New Testament’s understanding of the one divine purpose brought to fulfillment in Jesus Christ (287).
Oddly, to my mind, he then skips over the commentators on Isaiah from the middle of the 20th century and leaps to “post-modern” commentators. Here I am thinking especially of those in the Old Testament Library which Childs’ 2001 volume replaces: Otto Kaiser and Claus Westermann. But to them should also be added the work of R.B.Y. Scott, James Muilenburg, and Hans Wildberger. As it stands, Childs represents Brueggemann’s work as standing in sharp contrast to what had preceded him, venturing to say that Brueggemann is no longer in the stream of Christian interpretation of the book of Isaiah. I suggest that if the works I have just mentioned had been included in the study it would emerge that there is a fairly clear continuum from George Adam Smith (1878), whom Childs greatly admires, to Brueggemann, whom Childs sees as beyond the pale. In short, I don’t believe Childs has fully faced the impact of 19th and 20th century higher criticism upon the interpretation of Isaiah. In fact, I think Childs is right: post-modern interpretation has gone beyond the pale. But it has only done so as a result of carrying critical commitments to their logical conclusion, something I do not believe Childs has adequately addressed.

In summary, while this book is unquestionably a tour de force of erudition and scholarship and will be of great interest to historians of Biblical interpretation, I do not think it offers us much help on the way forward to our continuing use of the book of Isaiah as Christian scripture.

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God is Not Religious, Nice, “One of Us,” an American, a Capitalist
D. Brent Laytham, ed.
Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press.
2004, 152 pp., paper, $15.99
Reviewed by Michael Rynkiewich

“Neti, neti, neti” the Hindus say about God. This ancient theme is critical for ecclesiology and missiology if the church in America is to emerge from the prison of civil religion. Laytham asks, “Who is God?” but most people think they already know. Aquinas said: “We cannot know what God is, but only what God is not” (10). The church’s allegiances have shaped what it thinks about God. Now is the time to let God shape the church’s allegiances.

“God is Not ‘a Stranger on the Bus’: Discerning the Divine in Popular Culture,” by Rodney Clapp, disappoints. Clapp defines “culture” as “a social
body and process that forms particular sorts of persons” (24), thus confusing culture (ideas, beliefs and values) with society (persons, roles and groups) and losing the dynamic between what people say and what people do.

Clapp is right that “Modern popular culture comes to us through the mass media, as songs and films and television programs already prepackaged” (26). Popular culture can create a crowd that misconstrues God in its own image. Durkheim said this well over a century ago. Clapp calls for discernment within the Christian community based not on our opinions but on our convictions. To the contrary, our starting place is God, who creates a counter-cultural community that is both prophet and servant to society.

D. Stephen Long, in “God is Not Nice,” wants to protect the Triune God from trivialization. Long claims that God neither needs us, seeks us nor invites us into personal relationship. But, as he confesses, he has gone too far. God is missional (reaching-out, self-giving, other-embracing) by nature. God seeks us on God’s own terms. Many churches adjust the terms to produce communities with no sinners and no saints. As Long says, “Far from being charitable, kind, or open to the Holy Spirit, the sentimental niceness that characterizes much of the church is a veiled form of power that allows us to hold the Christian tradition in contempt and wage war against it, all the while claiming to be its victim rather than its executioner” (48).

Michael J. Baxter claims that “God is Not American: Or, Why Christians Should Not Pledge Allegiance to ‘One Nation under God’” I am sympathetic because I had to relearn the Pledge when Eisenhower messed with tradition in 1956. Baxter wisely reminds us that “God’s purposes may well be aligned with a form of freedom and justice that is represented neither by the United States nor by al-Qaeda, but rather by some other political entity or body or by the church itself” (60). Baxter critiques the myth of a Christian America. “In a time of war, therefore, the challenge of Christians, scattered among the nations of the world, is to live as the one body of Christ and to pledge their allegiance not to one nation under God, but to one church under God” (75).

Michael L. Budde, in “God is Not a Capitalist,” warns churches not to mimic businesses. The church has positioned itself to bring some “realism and rationality on God’s interaction with the world, lest God’s creation be undone by the goodness of God’s own heart” (89). In contrast, Budde offers “God’s radical economy” where God promises more than we would deliver.

William T. Cavanaugh, in “God is Not Religious,” claims that modern understandings of religion “privatize Christian practice, marginalize it from common life, bury God deep within the confines of the individual self, and thereby turn the individual over to the disciplines and designs of the nation-state and the market” (98). It may be that “faith in the living God helps us lose our religion” (98).
Laytham concludes with “God Is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.” These terms are defined by God because God speaks first, God speaks into our context and God guides our speaking. Thus, “if we speak truly of God, it is by virtue of God speaking in the Son and sharing in the Spirit” (119). Laytham’s affirmation that “the entire life of the church—in all its varied practices—is meant to embody participation in the Father’s sending of the Son and the Spirit for the sake of the world” (136) is good news for missiologists, but it comes late in the book. After disentangling the concept of God from American culture, the task is to discover God’s terms of engagement with the world.

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**A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics**

**David Jasper**

*Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press*

2004, xii, 148 pp., paper, $19.95

Reviewed by Charles M. Wood

David Jasper, who has written several useful studies at the intersection of theology and literature, aims here to provide an overview of a tradition of reflection that has shaped scholarship in both areas. He begins quite properly with a set of disclaimers: the book is “very modest in its aims and objectives,” “makes absolutely no claims to originality,” and “is limited very largely to the Western Christian tradition and its roots in the interpretation of the Bible” (xi). The book has its own roots in the author’s classroom experience in teaching courses in hermeneutics over the years, and, like those courses, it is meant to invite new participants into this inquiry. Each chapter ends with a brief summary of main points and a list of questions to stimulate reflection, for the benefit of the independent reader as well as for use in group or class discussion.

After an initial chapter devoted to some preliminary conceptual clarification, the book is organized chronologically, with each chapter sampling hermeneutical developments over a certain period of time. The chapters are organized so as to indicate what sorts of hermeneutical assumptions or preoccupations were held in common by the interpreters of a particular era, and what differentiated them; what intellectual or cultural events triggered (or were triggered by) transitions in approaches to interpretation; and what legacy of solutions and problems these writers have
passed on to subsequent times, including our own. The treatments of each major period, to say nothing of individual writers, are necessarily quite brief and broad-brush, and readers familiar with the territory will no doubt take issue with Jasper’s interpretations and generalizations at various points. I imagine that this would not disappoint him in the least. His intention is not to offer a comprehensive and definitive history of the discipline of hermeneutics, but to provide one sketch of the major currents in this long tradition, to introduce the leading contributors to its development, and to provoke further exploration.

In the last chapter (“Varieties of Postmodern Hermeneutics”) and in a brief conclusion on “the sacred text and the future of writing,” Jasper touches most directly on some of his own constructive hermeneutical and theological interests. Another sort of short introduction to hermeneutics might have given greater prominence to these interests and insights, and might, say, have examined the hermeneutical tradition(s) thematically rather than chronologically, culminating in some constructive proposals. This, too, would have been a welcome contribution, especially given Jasper’s broader literary expertise. But in terms of the quite clear and legitimate aims and objectives he set for himself in this book, he has amply succeeded.

**For Further Reading:**


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