

Book Reviews

A Dictionary of Asian Christianity, edited by Scott W. Sunquist, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001. 991 pages, \$75.

Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology, by James K. A. Smith, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 291 pages, \$21.99.

A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony, edited by Leanne Van Dyk, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. 175 pages, \$15.00.

No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins, by Carl B. Smith II, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004. xvii, 317pages, \$29.95.

Twilight of the Gods: Polytheism in the Hebrew Bible, by David Penchansky, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. 160 pages, \$19.95.

Sunquist, Scott W., ed., *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001. 991 pages, \$75.

The publication of *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* filled a great void in missiological literature. Up until its appearance in 2001, many of its 1,260 entries had either not been discussed in print in English at all or had been written up exclusively by Western missionaries, mission historians and missiologists. Fortunately, within the past few decades, a new generation of indigenous Asian Christian scholars has arisen that has both the academic expertise and the cultural insights necessary to help the global Church 'see' the history and development of the Christian Church in Asian lands through Asian eyes. The work includes valuable contributions made by Western scholars on important topics not covered by Asian contributors, but the great majority of names in the Contributors list are Asian. A major goal of this broadly ecumenical project was to provide a basic reference for Asian Christians who have few recorded accounts to refer to, a goal that it has successfully achieved. It is also a much welcomed resource for the world Church as well.

This mammoth ten year project involved 500 Asian scholars from 18 Asian countries writing about Asian Christian biographical, historical and theological subjects. Four hundred sixty four larger survey articles covering all of Asia were based on the combination of contributions from teams of various countries. The work includes historical accounts, analyses of issues that help explain the Christian presence in Asia and accounts showing how contexts shaped local churches and how churches influenced their contexts for good or for ill.

Western missionaries are included only if they had a significant impact on the development of some aspect of Asian Christianity as understood from the perspective of local church leaders. In this regard, one is disappointed to find no entries on seminal missionaries like John VanNest Talmadge and A.L. Warnshuis in China, Guido Verbeck in Japan, Thomas Barclay and Samuel Noordhoff in Taiwan and the Scudder family in India. Protestant mission societies are not included in order to avoid turning the book into a dictionary of Christian missions. For space reasons, Christian educational institutions and major churches are only mentioned as part of the description of trends and generalizations.

An undertaking involving so many people and so many sources is bound to be uneven in its presentation and style. There is repetition. For example, two-thirds of an article on the Nestorian Church (p. 596) is repeated almost verbatim in an article on the "Nestorian Church, China" (pp. 597-598). The book also suffers from a lack of careful checking of historical data and detail. For example, an article on 'Pontianak' in Borneo (p. 664) is written solely from a Roman Catholic historical point of view and makes no mention of the Reformed Church in America's mission there (1836-1849) which

predated occasional visits there by a Catholic priest by some 35 years! There is no discussion of the 19th century historical roots of the Chinese 'Three Self Patriotic Movement' in South Fujian Province in P. Wickerie's article (p. 846). The *Dictionary* needs an index connecting contributors and entries so that readers can know who wrote what. A detailed overall index would also be helpful, especially since the spelling of more than a few names is not standardized. For example, John Jin-Jyi-giokk (p. xxxi) is also listed as Tin Jyi-Giokk (p. xl), and Lian-A-Fa (p. 2) as Leong Kung Fa (p. 482).

Much requested material was not received in time for inclusion in this volume, and much of the material that was received could not be included. In his Preface (pp. xxiii-xxiv), the editor refers to this volume as a "first edition." An Asian research network is now in place, and the implied promise is that we have only seen the beginning of what will eventually be a more inclusive and accurate reference work documenting the life and witness of Asian churches. A good and valuable beginning has been made in this initial volume, which is well worth a space in the library of any Christian academic, pastor and worker.

-Wendell Karsen

Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology, by James K. A. Smith, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 291 pages, \$21.99.

Smith divides his book into two parts: mapping the present state of Radical Orthodoxy (RO) in the first and charting a course in new directions – including critical engagement with the Reformed tradition – in the second. The cartographic first part contains three chapters wherein Smith sketches RO's place in the theological landscape (chap. 1), highlights its core themes (chap. 2), and rehearses its narration of intellectual history (chap. 3).

In the navigational second part Smith argues that modernity adopts an ontology divorced from the transcendent, thereby inventing an epistemology of autonomous reason, which in turn drives the modern politics of "the secular." RO counters this vision with a participatory ontology (chap. 6), an epistemology based on the inseparability of reason and revelation (chap. 5), and a politics of the city of God (chap. 4).

Smith hopes to address three audiences: (1) confessional Christian theologians and philosophers, to whom he introduces RO and casts a constructive vision for post-secular theology; (2) a narrower sub-group already concerned with RO, drawing their attention to the potential, reciprocal relationship between RO and the Reformed tradition of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd; (3) the church, especially the "emerging church" movement.

Smith carries out this ambitious project by focusing on each tradition's stance vis-à-vis secularity, deducing from that stance their purported (and purportedly all-important) ontological presuppositions and funneling them into opposing camps in a caricatured, melodramatic intellectual history. These techniques, inchoate in RO, become prominent with Smith as the scope of his project requires him to advance his thesis by alluding to and summarizing arguments made elsewhere in the RO canon.

I fear Smith—along with Milbank in his foreword—risks marginalizing the first and third of his intended audiences. Clipped treatment of complex issues won't compel theologians and philosophers who don't already share RO's presuppositions. And the "community of pastors, worship directors, and other church leaders...within the broader evangelical tradition" (p. 28) might find impenetrable the argument Smith casts in the idiom of "those particularly concerned with Radical Orthodoxy" (p. 27). However, I hope Smith's insight, erudition, and passion overcome these obstacles, finding auditors amongst all three audiences in which he admirably participates.

-Mike DeJonge

A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony, edited by Leanne Van Dyk, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. 175 pages, \$15.00.

Introducing this collective work, Leanne Van Dyk states that there are two main goals of this book: to make clear the connections between theology and worship, and to join the conversation with those interested in and committed to theology and worship (xvi). The authors indeed provoke meaningful dialogue between the acts of worship and theology, highlighting the deep integration that has been present throughout the historical Christian tradition. Six liturgical movements divide the book, each paired with corresponding doctrines. The Opening of Worship was paired with the Doctrine of the Trinity. The Confession and Words of Assurance were paired with the Doctrines of Sin and Grace. Creeds and Prayers were paired with Ecclesiology. The Proclamation of the Word of God (this including both the reading of Scripture and the Sermon) was paired with Revelation and Christology. The celebration of the Lord's Supper was paired with Eschatology and finally, the ending of the worship service, the Benediction and Charge was paired with Ethics. Further, each section concludes with various hymn suggestions to complement and enrich the worship experience.

Collectively, this book alerts readers not only to the profound reasons behind our worship liturgy, it additionally highlights a marriage that, according to Van Dyk, even casual observers of worship are able to notice. Theological questions and worship implications have always been knitted together and obvious to those individuals alert enough to see (xviii). Churches often seek to develop contemporary and innovative ways to explore worship in order to tailor more specifically to the needs of a young

generation. This book speaks to the richness that can oftentimes get lost when the substance of our worship liturgy is compromised.

Each of the six contributors writes with the passion of one who deeply believes in the interrelatedness of theology and worship. Any reader will find themselves pondering their own worship experiences, both good and bad, and pastors/worship leaders will find themselves seeking to develop a more meaningful and faithful worship strategy in their own churches or Christian communities. On a larger scale, this book provides opportunities to engage faithful Christians in the fundamental truth that liturgy and doctrine do indeed illuminate one another.

-Amy E. Avery

No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins, by Carl B. Smith II, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004. xvii, 317 pages, \$29.95.

The origin and character of Gnosticism have long been debated in academic circles. At one level, Carl B. Smith's *No Longer Jews* is simply another scholarly contribution to this discussion. But the topics treated are also important for average churchgoers because of the current public interest and sympathy for Gnosticism. Books about "gnostic" writings like the Gospel of Thomas from the Nag Hammadi library are big sellers, as a visit to your on-line bookstore will show. We hear it said that Gnostics were more tolerant than catholic Christians, that they allowed more diversity in their congregations, and that they encouraged people to develop their own potential rather than rely on the clergy and rituals of the Catholic Church. Gnostic texts are sometimes even said to preserve the earliest (hence purest) teachings of Jesus and his followers. Their Christology was often "docetic" – it denied that the eternal being known as the "Christ" had been born in the flesh or died on the cross. In contrast, the Catholic Church was more dogmatic and regarded all views other than its own as being "heretical." Furthermore, Catholics stressed negative ideas of suffering and martyrdom. For modern people who have had painful personal experiences in churches, the recent spate of publications about Gnosticism provides a welcome alternative.

Carl Smith is one of a number of scholars who can help Christians get a more accurate picture of developments in the early church. He argues convincingly that the evidence points to a relatively late emergence of Gnosticism – properly defined in terms of the rejection of the Creator God of the Old Testament – and clear dependence on the texts and teachings of the Catholic Church (p. 203). Gnosticism did not appear on the scene until after the Second Jewish War (115-117 CE), particularly in Egypt (p.112). During this period, Judaism and Christianity still overlapped to a large extent, so it is difficult to say that Gnosticism arose from one or the other. Emphases vary: most Gnostic texts

are vehement in their rejection of basic Jewish and Christian ideas, while others make no reference to Christian ideas at all. Gnostics were not always tolerant: several Nag Hammadi texts declare that all opinions other than their own – even those of other Gnostic groups – were heretical (pp. 199, 201). In particular, most Gnostic writings are even more anti-Judaic (though not anti-Semitic) than catholic writings like the “Letter of Barnabas” (pp. 204-213). Some Gnostics declared Docetism (the denial of Christ’s suffering) to be a heresy! (p. 198). Several Gnostic texts advocate a far greater degree of asceticism and self-denial than New Testament texts did (p. 203).

Smith has no intention downgrading the Gnostic writings, or discouraging people from reading them. His book is written for academic rather than ideological purposes. But it will also disabuse us of the romantic picture that has been painted in some popular treatments of Gnosticism. Had any of the Gnostic writings become the standard teaching of the Christian churches, modern people would probably feel even less welcome there than they do in real present-day churches, faulty as they may be.

-Christopher B. Kaiser

Twilight of the Gods: Polytheism in the Hebrew Bible, by David Penchansky, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. 160 pages, \$19.95

Penchansky provides us with a clear, concise introduction to the problem of monotheism in the Old Testament, synthesizing material from Norman Gottwald, Mark S. Smith, Claudia Camp, Morton Smith, and others. He reviews a wide variety of evidence to show that ancient Israel had many different forms of theism and that these different theologies persisted and interacted over time. In his “subversive reading” of the Old Testament, there was no simple evolution from polytheism to strict monotheism. Instead these historians reconstruct a progression from the divine council in which Yahweh is a secondary member (Deut. 32:9), to a pantheon of divine beings (sometimes called angels) with Yahweh as the source of their power (e.g., 1 Kings 22:19; Job 1:6; Psalm 103:21). Psalm 82 is transitional: it preserves the outline of the older theology in which Yahweh/Elohim is a member of the divine council and allows Yahweh to depose the other members and assume their responsibilities (pp. 35-38).

The first five chapters focus on rituals and forces that appear to work independently of the will of Yahweh: the sacrifice of Meshah’s son in 2 Kings 3; personal “mishap” (*miqreh*) in Qohelet (cf. Deut. 23:10); the disobedient “sons of the gods” in Genesis 6; and the Accuser in Job 1-2.

The last three chapters deal with the feminine divine figures in Hebrew tradition: Hokhmah (Wisdom), Lady Zion, and Asherah. Each of these has a distinct voice of her

own, but each can also be viewed as an aspect of hypostatization of the Godhead (60-61). PENCHANSKY'S treatment of Proverbs 8 indicates that Wisdom was neither created nor emanated but conceived and child-birthed from God, who is both mother and father in the process (pp. 54-58, 63). This background helps explain the Nicene Christological formula, "begotten [of God the Father], not made" (p. 60).

One thing PENCHANSKY does not consider in this slim volume is the possibility of conflict among the attributes of God. The unholy census of Israel is ascribed to God in 2 Samuel 24:1 and to Satan in 1 Chronicles 21:1. It appears that Satan can represent the wrathful side of the Deity (cf. 37 on Yahweh/Elohim as the Accuser in Psalm 82).

While opening the way to a more tolerant stance toward polytheism and idolatry, PENCHANSKY can still be rather dogmatic about right and wrong readings of the Old Testament (e.g., pp. 34n, 45). He replaces the traditional monotheistic reading of the Old Testament with a historicist reading. Only the original meaning (historically reconstructed) can be valid. Old Testament historians can teach us a lot, but they need to be supplemented by scholars like James Kugel who document the living ongoing interpretation of the texts by communities of faith. PENCHANSKY would no doubt agree. He concludes that the complex (Trinitarian) monotheism taught by the church allows him to continue in his own faith as well as in his historical scholarship (p. 92).

-Christopher B. Kaiser

The Worshipping Life: Meditations on the Order of Worship, by Lisa Nichols Hickman, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. 162pp., \$14.95.

At the very heart of our identity as a Reformed people is the rhythm of our worship. For people of the Reformed tradition, worship is not a passive, merely entertaining act. We gather together as a community of faith, we proclaim together the holiness of our God and hear the scriptures, and we respond together in prayer, sacrament and service. Hickman has beautifully scripted together answers to the questions that most surely arise in every Reformed congregation: "Why do we do that? Is it really important? Why should this matter to me?" In breaking down each larger segment of our historical order of worship (Gathering, Proclaiming, Responding, Sealing, Bearing Out), Hickman gives short reflections and meditations into the beauty of "why we do what we do."

Providing an insightful look into the many facets of our worship, breaking down everything from the Call to Worship to the Children's Sermon and the Middle Hymn to the Benediction, Hickman further goes on to complement how this order, this tempo, follow us out of the sanctuary and into our daily lives. Our very lives are meant to worship. For Hickman, the axis upon which all our worship revolves is the Assurance of Pardon. Congregational confessions can change and vary from week to week, but

the assurance remains the same: in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Hickman writes that although the assurance is a mere six word phrase, it speaks to us immeasurably of the banner that surrounds us, constantly proclaiming our acceptance in the eyes of God, no matter what (pp. 33-36).

Hickman's writing is clear, concise, and speaks in pastoral-like, conversational tone as she draws from experiences of both the pulpit and the pew. Hickman acknowledges the difficulties that come for those whose weekly job it is to lead worship and gently challenges the ways that worship becomes mundane and rote. Any congregation or small group who seek to help themselves grow more intentionally into a deeper understanding of the worshipping life, both inside and outside the walls of the church, will find Hickman's writing to be extremely thought-provoking and spiritually enriching

-Amy E. Avery