

Reviews

WHITE CHINA: Finding the Divine in the Everyday by Molly Wolf

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005. 211 Pages. Paperback \$18.99

Theology could seem like such a heavy topic, but Molly Wolf brings theological reflection into the world of the everyday. She shares her understandings of God and the relationship between God, humankind and creation through exploring everyday activities.

Part One of the book focuses on “Nature”. Sharing her observations of and interactions with such specific parts of creation as cats, bonsai, ducks and milkweed, Wolf brings to life theological concepts such as relinquishment, trusting God and certainty. In regard to our relationships with each other, questions arise around the idea of forcing something to be other than what it should be, or what it means to be entrapped, or meshed together.

In Part Two, her section on “Being Human”, Wolf acknowledges that as we delight in God and God’s creation, and long for the peaceable kingdom, we have a tendency to shut out parts of the story which aren’t peaceable, and to disconnect ourselves from active involvement in creating the kingdom. She points out that while we might see God as appearing two-faced at times, that isn’t God, but rather our own perception. These delightful insights are presented through her own very ordinary life experiences – facing unwanted chores, doing home renovations, experiences with children, and reflections on the weather.

“Truths and Illusions” is the focus of Part Three. Honesty about the acceptability of doubts and struggles in our faith, acknowledgment of the use (misuse!) of Christian beliefs as a means of conformity and control, and dealing with struggles created by a church’s expectation of a literal understanding of the Bible are some of the issues Wolf brings up. She points out that some ways of being spiritual are more rewarding and productive than others. Being challenged about organized religion, Wolf

acknowledges that we don't get it all right, but that doesn't mean religion should be blamed for everything negative, while everything positive is credited to spirituality. Rather, "everyone has a theology, the question is whether it's any good" (p. 72).

Part Four is about "Answered Prayer". Mud, seasons, driving, the Psalms, and someone who died are the everyday topics bringing reflections on prayer. Miracles, where we want to go, where we are taken — these are some of the questions pondered upon. The importance of prayer — not "prayer-warrior" type, but rather gentle, constant wrapping around — is that it forms community and witnesses to God's love. Prayer involves trust which brings us closer to God. "The essential point of prayer is what it makes of us" (p. 92).

"Saints Ancient and Modern" is the theme of Part Five. Wolf explores ideas around obedience and radical faith; the meaning of incarnation; the "thin place" that sleep can provide; being called to do what is uncomfortable, not just what we do best; and how fear keeps us from doing what others need. The stories of Mary and Joseph, of Joseph the dream-

er, of Mary and Martha, provide the food for thought in this section.

"Lighten Our Darkness" is the topic of Part Six. Through reflections on a cathedral and listening to news travel, Wolf explores the elite and the underclass of society, the meaning of forgiveness and the problems of re-victimization, the idea that the Kingdom of God means standing with the oppressed and confronting injustice. She acknowledges seeing the world's brokenness often gives a sense of the absence of God. And while we need to take this world as God takes us — bright and dark together — we can also appreciate that God brings light into the darkness.

Part Seven of uses pines, old acquaintances and the death of a pet cat to focus on "Last Things". Reflections on old age, death, and grieving remind us of the fullness of God's time. Wolf brings up a challenge of the honesty of western medicine which seems to promote health as a god and "promises that worship of this deity will bring a long and happy life" (p. 182).

"God Stuff", in Part Eight, includes cooties — those "invisible but contagious non-biologic-

al germs”, and the problems of selective reading of scriptures. Loving neighbours, inclusiveness, and the need for discernment — rather than an attitude of “anything goes” — are paths of reflection which Wolf treads down.

The book is delightful, homey, insightful. Molly Wolf explains biblical truths in our modern day context. She does so by clarifying and validating the truths through her own experience. Personally, I love that she acknowledges her faith is not dependent upon many truths of Christianity being literal/factual truths.

– Catherine Taylor

**THE LAST WEEK: A
Day-by-Day Account of
Jesus’ Final Week in
Jerusalem
by John Dominic Crossan
and Marcus Borg
Harper San Francisco,
2006. Cloth, \$28.95**

John Dominic Crossan has famously observed that he has reached a stage of life in which

he is no longer capable of distinguishing between study and prayer. In so noting, of course, he is in good rabbinic company — including both Paul and Jesus. With Marcus Borg as his collaborator, Crossan has offered an object lesson in the convergence of devotion and discernment in their slim yet comprehensive 2006 study of Holy Week, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’ Final Week in Jerusalem*.

Their text is the Gospel according to Mark, which as they note, is the sole Gospel narrative structured on a day-by-day basis over the full eight-day cycle of Palm Sunday through Easter. They treat their subject with both head and heart. No one knows the “ground of the Gospels” half so well as Crossan; few touch the hearts of contemporary Christian and skeptic alike as Marcus Borg. Their seamlessly blended narrative, rich in imagery, exacting in detail and poignant in purpose provides a powerful devotional study for the Lenten season as a whole and Holy Week in particular.

Their presenting argument is to address the popular Mel Gibson-esque notion of the Passion

of Jesus as limited to the arrest in the garden, trial, torture and torment capped by the act of substitutionary atonement on the cross: Jesus dies horribly to satisfy an implacable and essentially merciless deity that we might ourselves escape punishment.

They are concerned to demonstrate that “the first passion of Jesus was the Kingdom of God”; that “it was that first passion for God’s distributive justice that led inevitably to the second passion by Pilate’s punitive justice”; and “to narrow the passion of Jesus to his last twelve hours...is to ignore the connection between his life and his death.”

They succeed admirably, and in so doing focus a gospel spotlight of nearly unbearable intensity on the shortcomings of the city of “humanity”, not least of which is the church itself in its Constantinian expression. They are unequivocal in their blunt assessment of the societal “domination system”...shorthand for the most common form of social system... in ancient and premodern times,” which was extant in the Judea of Jesus’ ministry. Domination systems, they explain, are marked by political oppression,

economic exploitation by the wealthy of the majority, and religious legitimization of the whole sorry system.

Everything about Jesus’ life and teaching was in explicit and implicit repudiation of the domination system. He championed instead the biblical and traditional exposition of the reign of God. Incarnating God’s will led to the inevitable. In such a world as that, in such a world as this, the cross was the only outcome to be expected. Substitutionary atonement, in the hands of Crossan and Borg, is unmasked as the nonsense and irrelevance it has surely always been to the truly devout.

In Jesus full-life passion, the “realized eschatology” of the late C.H. Dodd is once again affirmed, the resurrection by whatever description and definition the unmistakable vindication of the cross. Their concern is by no means limited to the realms of the political and economic, however. In some of their most effective exposition, Crossan and Borg address the issue of failed discipleship as a major motif in Mark’s account of Jesus’ last week. The behaviour of Peter, James, John, the Twelve collect-

ively and of course poor, pathetic Judas is, in their words, “a warning gift to all who ever hear or read (Mark’s) narrative”. To the contemporary Christian employing this book as a Lenten devotional study they note, “We must think of Lent today as a penitential season because we know that, like those first disciples, we would like to avoid the implications of this journey with Jesus. We would like its Holy Week conclusion to be about the interior rather than the exterior life, about heaven rather than earth, about the future rather than the present, and, above all else, about religion safely and securely quarantined from politics.”

This is heady stuff and effective, and it renders their account of the passion almost timeless. Except, that is, for a certain lameness about the resurrection. Neither Borg nor Crossan seem to be able to offer a convincing exposition of the first Easter. “So Easter is utterly central,” they declare, then ask, “What is it?” That they lack a convincing answer is disappointing; but then, that part is up to us and the risen Christ anyway.

— James Christie

**eucharist with a small “e”
by Miriam Therese Winter
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis,
2005. 158 pages. \$14.87**

Miriam Therese Winter, Professor of Liturgy, Worship, Spirituality and Feminist Studies at Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, first became known to baby-boomers in the 60s with her best-selling collection of popular Christian music, *Joy is the Like the Rain*. She continues to compose significant hymns (six are in *Voices United*) and craft noteworthy liturgical resources (e.g., the three-volume feminist lectionary and psalter, *WomanWord*, *WomanWisdom* and *WomanWitness*). She will turn 70 in 2008 and shows no signs of slowing down. Moreover, she seems to be engaging in an ever-deepening reflection on her personal journey, theological vision and liturgical spirituality — one deeply rooted in the promise of Vatican II Roman Catholicism, feminist theology and committed social activism.

In *eucharist with a small “e”* she gives us “a small book with a big agenda” (one first introduced in her recent spiritual autobio-

graphy *The Singer and the Song*): the “deeper integration of the sacred and the secular,” a “new way of seeing” and engaging all of life as eucharist. By reflecting on the implications of Jesus’ words and actions in fifteen parables and twenty-two meal stories, she directs our attention beyond our liturgical preoccupation with the Last Supper to the broader scope of Jesus’ ethic of table fellowship.

In her chapter on the origins of Eucharist she sets up a provocative contrast between the Corinthian model of Eucharist and the Jerusalem experience of breaking bread. In Corinth, Paul, in an effort to address behavioral and ethical abuses, emphasized the authoritative tradition as “handed on” by Jesus (1 Cor. 11:23-26), resulting in a focus on the memory of the Last Supper (“do this in remembrance of me”). Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, the community broke bread together with “glad and generous hearts,” and “held all things in common” (Act 2:42-47). These “two fundamentally different types of eucharist” were born in different contexts facing different circumstances. Paul was trying to establish order in divisive

Corinth while the community in Jerusalem was joyfully celebrating the resurrected Jesus. The former led to an institutional and liturgical focus on the remembrance of the crucified Christ at the expense of an inclusive and celebrative lifestyle of communal sharing.

While this historical and theological distinction is the key to Winter’s approach, her method is not primarily historical. Most of the book is given to scriptural storytelling and theological reflection in an effort to be consistent with Jesus’ own approach to table fellowship. This is not about Eucharist with a capital “E”, not about the liturgical life of the Church, but rather a new lens through which to view the whole of the Spirit-filled life. “In one sense,” she suggests, “eucharist with a small ‘e’ is not really about Jesus but what Jesus was about. What were his issues, his main concerns? How might we champion similar causes and make what was his our own?” (117) To this end, her method attempts to follow that of Jesus: Tell stories; share all of life; live transformed and resurrected.

While some of Winter’s scriptural paraphrases and result-

ing reflections don't quite live up to the promise of her original exciting idea, the material nevertheless contains thought-provoking gems. Her exegesis of the Emmaus resurrection appearance (Luke 24:13-25) convincingly argues that one of the disciples was a woman. Elsewhere she similarly locates women within the biblical narratives in ways that have integrity, recover their presence and empower their voices. She makes particularly creative connections between small "e" eucharist, hunger and the body — even quantum theory, creation and the cosmos. This accessible and concise book could easily be used to guide a bible study, spirituality group or inform preaching on many significant texts.

It is not Winter's intention to disparage the value of Eucharist with a capital "E" but "to retrieve this authentic tradition [eucharist with a small "e"] from the shadows of our received Tradition." Of course, one cannot help but hear a critique of Eucharist by eucharist. But what this reader took from the work was, in fact, a creative articulation of the very kind of eucharistic spirituality so needed in sac-

ramental theology and practice. In this sense, what Winter has given us is a glimpse of a renewed vision of sacramentality for our times. Now I'm left thinking of some of the other possibilities to which she only hints: sacraments with a small "s"; baptism with a small "b" — the list goes on.

— William S. Kervin

**GOD IS NOT GREAT:
How Religion Poisons
Everything**
by Christopher Hitchens
Toronto: McClelland &
Stewart, 2007, 307 pages.
Paperback \$19.99.

Critics of religion have become almost commonplace in our secular age — Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett — but one name stands out: Christopher Hitchens, author of a recent book, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Hitchens is a well-known journalist. His style is flamboyant, his knowledge immense, his intelligence is awesome, his experience wide and varied, and his wit

caustic. He revels in hyperbole. He has a reputation for being deadly on the platform and in debate.

He tells of an interview with “one of America’s better-known religious broadcasters.”

He challenged me in public to answer what he called a “straight yes/no questions,” and I happily agreed.... I was to imagine myself in a strange city as the evening was coming on. Toward me I was to imagine that I saw a large group of men approaching. Now – would I feel safer, or less safe, if I was to learn that they were just coming from a prayer meeting?... I was able to answer it. “Just to stay within the letter ‘B,’ I have actually had that experience in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad. In each case I can say absolutely, and can give my reasons, why I would feel immediately threatened if I thought that the group of men approaching me in the dusk were coming from a religious observance.” (p. 18)

Hitchens is proud of this incident, and rightly so. It’s a

devastating response, and he goes on to discuss it for ten more pages, recounting his experiences in each of these cities.

Those who are religious should not be hasty in condemning Hitchens. Often we should find ourselves agreeing with him. Religion through human history has, more often than not, been a bad thing. No god is better than bad religion. But if we don’t condemn Hitchens, we should stand ready to criticize him. Sometimes religion has been a good thing. It does not poison everything.

It seems clear, however, that Hitchens hates all religion, and his attack is almost frenetic. His tactic is blitzkrieg, a violent frontal attack whose purpose is to overwhelm all opposition. He piles fact upon fact, chapter after chapter. He uses information, not reason.

Why does he have to overstate his case? He has enough knowledge, intelligence, and common sense to know that religion does not poison *everything*, that some religion is good. Why the vehemence, especially when he himself calls for reason and balance? His insistent use of a

small “g” for god in the title could be called childish.

For this reason, the book, however impressive, is disappointing. He raises questions, but doesn’t answer them. In his chapter on “Religion’s Corrupt Beginnings”, he might have pointed to the fearsome gods of primitive peoples, or even the reality of human sacrifice. Instead he chooses to debunk the origins of the Mormon religion in the revelations of Joseph Smith. In fact, “religion’s beginnings” recall the way that anthropology has indicated the correspondence of the first evidences of religion with the origins of our humanity.

In his final chapter, he calls for a “new enlightenment”. One might expect a great manifesto of his own eschatological vision, but once again there is much criticism of religion but little definition of what he means by his

vision. At the very time when we are beginning to realize the defects in our Enlightenment heritage, (and there is of course much that is good in that heritage), Hitchens seems to call for an uncritical return to that segment of our past.

In these days of religious pluralism, we find many who have assumed that all religion is good. It isn’t. Much religion in human history has been bad. Religion has indeed poisoned much of life, and those who acknowledge faith must be prepared to defend their belief and to ensure that it bears good fruit. Faith today needs challengers like Hitchens, so that we are forced to question our beliefs, our customs, our acquired and accepted traditions, and to recover the goodness, depth, and truth in what we do believe.

— Alan Reynolds