



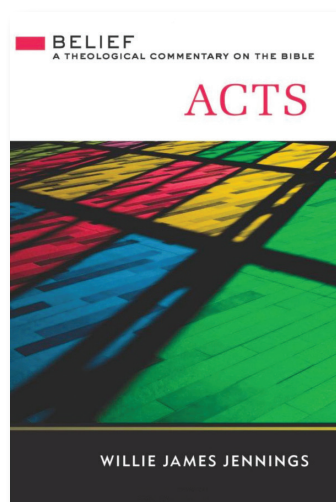
# Book Reviews

## July 2020

Section Editors: Craig Nesson, Ralph Klein, Troy Troftgruben

### Review a book!

*Currents in Theology and Mission* is seeking to expand its number of regular book reviewers. If you have interest, please send name, contact information, and areas of primary interest to [currents@lstc.edu](mailto:currents@lstc.edu).



**Acts. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible.** By Willie James Jennings. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-6642-3400-3. xviii & 289 pages. Hardcover. \$40.00.

Willie Jennings is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale Divinity School. As an author, he is known most for his award-winning *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (2010). Here Jennings brings his distinctive expertise as a theological thinker to interpreting Acts. What results is a commentary on Acts unlike any other.

Like other volumes in the *Belief* series, the commentary is relatively brief, more readable than technical, and informed but limited in citations. Most distinctively, it bypasses the conventional discussions of most commentaries (e.g., author and date, text-critical issues, story historicity, lexical analysis) to focus on theological interpretation. While readers looking for historical background will be frustrated, others will be pleasantly surprised and enthused by the originality of Jennings' interpretive work. For example, in interpreting Acts 3:1-26 (The Healing of a Crippled Man) and 9:1-19a (Saul on the Damascus Road), Jennings forgoes discussion of details like geography, chronology, and healing in antiquity in order to reflect deeply on dimensions related to life-changing encounters with the divine (40-45, 90-95). Throughout the commentary, Jennings emphasizes God and the Holy Spirit as the narrative's only significant actors (254). Human beings merely respond (often slowly) to divine initiative. At points further appreciation of human agency may be welcome (e.g., on Ananias and Sapphira's death, 52-57; Stephen's speech

as divine word, 68-72), but Jennings' approach attends very well to the significance of divine actors in a narrative whose title (Acts of the Apostles) may otherwise lead readers elsewhere.

Jennings engages different voices than the average NT commentary (e.g., Edward Said, William Barber II, José de Acosta, Gloria Anzaldúa, Orlando Patterson, Angela Y. Davis, Katya Gibel Azoulay), without neglecting more conventional Euro-American interpreters (xv). Throughout, Jennings attends perceptively to dimensions of power and imperialism (e.g., 16-24, 38-40, 79-81, 175-178, 187-188, 193, 215-217, 239-247, 255-256). One example is how he appreciates the lived experience of diaspora (a life "always on edge," 65) at a level few other commentaries consider (64-66, 253-254). He suggests finally that "Acts is a plea to Jewish diaspora and every diaspora saying that there is a better way forward, a way to sustain your people not with violence, segregation, gated or walled communities, or fear but through faith in the resurrected Jesus and the life-giving Spirit" (254). Jennings holds that divine love is the most powerful, offensive, and dangerous threat to the status quo of power games and colonialism (8, 40). Throughout the commentary, Jennings also gives voice to interpretive viewpoints underemphasized by many commentaries, like Native American theology (106-107), Jewish interpretation (36-37, 110-114, 134), and most notably the experiences of the incarcerated (125-131, 163-169, 219-221). He also displays a refined expertise and wisdom on matters related to interculturality and race (e.g., 121-122, 145-149, 153-157, 182).

Jennings sees the story of Acts as a "revolution," as he names explicitly in the opening lines: "The book of Acts speaks of revolution. We must never forget this. It depicts life in the disrupting presence of the Spirit of God" (1; so also 27, 29, 53, 102, etc.). Accordingly, Jennings sees threats as "the central currency of this world" (49), incarceration and suffering (vs. safety) as "the ever-present consequence of obedience to God" (61-62, cf. 75-76), and faithful preaching and teaching as criminal acts since they question the status quo of this age (45-46). This approach differs from conventional, historic Euro-American interpretation, and refreshingly so, since Jennings has reflected deeply and authentically on the experiences and challenges of many minoritized and underrepresented interpretive voices.

The prose of Jennings' commentary is judicious, sometimes lyrical, occasionally credal (e.g., "light from light," 65), and consistently thoughtful. Positively, this gives the commentary a different feel—one more like an oral speech or sermon than a reference book. For example, he regularly emphasizes the "desiring" and (more provocatively) "erotic" nature of God, whose love toward creation is "untamable," "obsessive," and even "feverish" (12, 15, 81, 86, 90, 103, 112, 135, etc.). Another distinctive aspect of the commentary is how it integrates reflection on discipleship and experiences of the faithful today (e.g., 92, 94, 116-118). More focused discussion of these matters appears in segments titled "Further Reflections," which reflect explicitly on church and societal challenges today (e.g., "Evangelization



and Loving Difference,” 87-90; “The Seduction of Segregation,” 145-149).

The greatest strength of this volume is how different it is from the typical NT commentary. In fact, I read it with a very different focus than I do other commentaries: not to glean historical background or lexical details, but simply to engage in lively dialogue with a sensitive and informed theological interpreter—one who makes explicit connections to faith experiences in today’s world. Readers looking for more conventional historical-critical background should look elsewhere. The originality and distinctiveness of Jennings’ approach and interpretive voice ensure his book will be consulted by a wide range of Acts interpreters for years to come—and rightly so, since readers of Acts have much to learn, not only from him, but also the way he interweaves biblical interpretation with theological reflection and personal integrity. As Jennings names with appreciation in the Preface, for him “This was a beautiful labor of love that fed my soul and my mind as I meditated on Scripture. I understand better why ancient church writers did their most important theological work by commenting on Scripture” (xv).

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***Between the Swastika and the Sickle: The Life, Disappearance, and Execution of Ernst Lohmeyer.*** By James R. Edwards. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7618-8. 341 pages. Cloth. \$30.00.

As the title suggests, this is something of a “theological thriller.” It begins with the author’s discovery (during dis-

sertation research in the mid-1970s) of the mysterious and unexplained disappearance of Ernst Lohmeyer, who was the author of a German language commentary on Mark’s Gospel first published in 1936 (later republished in 1967). Edwards’ book is the account of his nearly half-century quest to solve the mystery of Lohmeyer’s disappearance, while pursuing his own career as a biblical scholar. Interlacing typical biographical fare, beginning with Lohmeyer’s birth to a turn-of-the-century Lutheran pastor’s family in northwestern Germany, Edwards periodically appears in the narrative as a historical/theological detective, drawing upon his own life experience and theological training to give perspective on Lohmeyer’s biography as an earlier New Testament scholar. This lends charm and interest to a story that otherwise

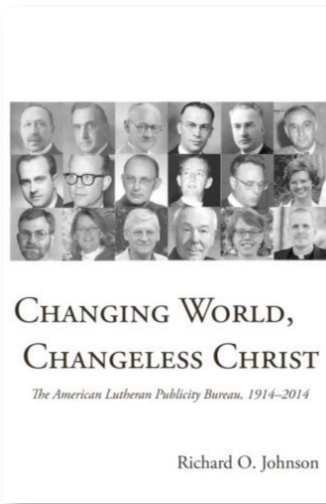
might overwhelm the reader with academic trivia.

Few biblical scholars of Lohmeyer’s reputation and accomplishment (Jeremias and Bultmann were peers and friends) lived a more consequential life, producing pathbreaking work (for example, on the social context of early Christianity), while serving for multiple years as a German soldier in both the First and Second World Wars. As an academic, he was also recognized for his administrative and leadership abilities, rising to serve as President both at the University of Breslau between the wars and the University of Greifswald, where he was arrested by the Russians the night before his scheduled inauguration in 1946. Given his principled and public position as an early and committed foe of the Nazis, defender of Jews (especially Jewish academic colleagues), and member of Germany’s Confessing Church, I find it amazing that Lohmeyer’s story is not better known.

Edwards is equipped as a fellow biblical scholar to appreciate the variety and depth of Lohmeyer’s scholarship and devotional writing (his book on the Lord’s Prayer may be his most well-known). Perhaps the author’s finest achievement, however, comes in the closing pages as he exegetes Lohmeyer’s final letter to his wife, Melie, shortly after his arrest by the Russians and not long before his secret execution in 1946. During Lohmeyer’s long years of separation from his wife while serving on the Russian front in Ukraine, they had become alienated. In his final letter to her he takes full blame for allowing his work and manifold other commitments to come between them, while describing to Melie a “happening” (“*Geschehen*”) that had occurred to him in prison the night of his arrest. Lohmeyer then described a mystical, God-induced visitation that suddenly and unexpectedly overwhelmed him, leading to both repentance and reconciliation to whatever his fate would be. Our thriller ends on a moving note of marital love revived by an act of God!

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*Author of the trilogy: Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Years A, B & C*



***Changing World,  
Changeless Christ: The  
American Lutheran  
Publicity Bureau,  
1914-2014.***

By Richard O. Johnson.  
Delhi, NY: ALPB  
Books, 2018. ISBN:  
978-1-8929-2136-9.  
xiii & 512 pages.  
Paperback. \$19.00.

This book is a real treat for students and scholars of American Lutheran history. Founded in 1914 by Missouri Synod pastors and laymen in New York City, the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau [ALPB]—whose history is related here—has participated in and shaped Lutheran church life for over a century. In its early years, the ALPB sought to raise awareness about Lutherans among the wider society and to strengthen cooperation between the various Lutheran church bodies of the time. By mid-twentieth century, ALPB writers were using their *American Lutheran* journal to advocate for the increased intra-Lutheran involvement of the Missouri Synod, playing key roles in the 1945 document known as “the Statement of the Forty-Four” and in the conflicts of the Missouri Synod in following decades. In light of Vatican II and developments in American Lutheranism after the 1960s, the ALPB—through its primary publications *Lutheran Forum* and *Forum Letter*—turned much of its ecumenical attention to Rome, embracing a vision of evangelical catholicism that defines its mission to this day.

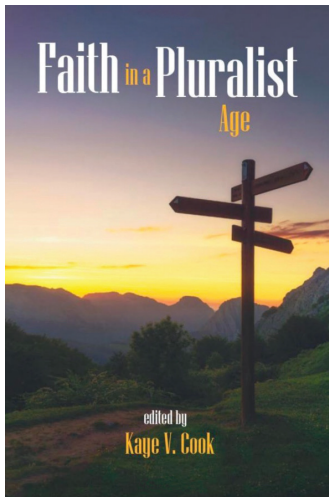
Organized chronologically (averaging over two chapters per decade), *Changing World, Changeless Christ* provides a detailed tour through many of the issues and challenges facing Lutherans over the past hundred years. It tells stories of Americanization, uses of media, and engagement in broader social issues. Beyond the narrow experience of the ALPB and Lutherans in general, these are broad American religious issues, to which Lutherans have responded in sometimes unique and sometimes typical ways. For instance, the perceived need to “publicize” one’s religion, for instance, is an extremely American approach to church and society, about which more might have been said. On the other hand, how Lutherans used modern communications to advance their unique Reformation heritage receives good attention in the book.

In presenting the history of the ALPB, Johnson’s authorial approach is largely that of a reporter. Primary sources like correspondence, minutes, and articles help retell the stories that mattered most in each period. While this method results in a strong documentary history, it also means that some blind spots of the past are related uncritically throughout the narrative. For example, each decade’s leaders saw themselves fighting the decline of

the church. Published in March 1914, *ALPB Bulletin* number 1 lamented, “Who will deny that the Church of Christ in this our country today is in a sad, deplorable condition?” (12). Articles from the 1930s described the waning influence of the church and the decline of Protestantism (69 and 92). A lament over the sad state of sexual ethics appeared in 1948. In 1962, Walter Bouman described American Lutheranism as “theologically sterile, organizationally sectarian and parochially stale” (215). Over the next fifty years, of course, such complaints would only grow, such that the ALPB has had to reckon publicly with its own crankiness (a major theme of the later chapters). Although this socio-religious despair is journalistically accurate in terms of people’s views in each era, the broader narrative of decline is not identified as a common trope. If every generation thinks it is enduring decay and decline, how accurate can such a viewpoint be? It seems instead to be a rhetorical strategy employed to generate certain effects, even if the people using this rhetoric do not recognize their participation in such a meta-narrative. A book like this could do more to identify and explore those broad themes that people living in the moment might not have seen for themselves.

Johnson’s history of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau makes for engaging reading and is a valuable contribution to the field. Paul Lindemann, founding editor of the ALPB’s *American Lutheran*, cast a vision that has remained inspiring over the decades. Voices of important figures in American Lutheranism like Theodor Graebner, John Tietjen, Richard John Neuhaus, and Paul Hinlicky come through clearly. A strong case is made for the enduring value of independent pan-Lutheran associations like the ALPB for pastors and congregations, as men and women continue to live out their gospel-centered faith in ways that resonate with changing cultures and the church catholic.

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***Faith in a Pluralist Age.***  
 Edited by Kaye V. Cook.  
 Eugene, Ore.: Cascade  
 Books, 2018. ISBN  
 978-1-5326-0994-7.  
 xvii & 134 pages.  
 Paper. \$20.00.

**H**ow can religions coexist when each claims to know the truth? This book begins with and centers around Peter Berger's final essay, "Faith in a Pluralist

Age," written while he was Visiting Scholar at Gordon College, where book editor Kaye V. Cook teaches. Berger died shortly before publication; Cook supports, continues, and expands Berger's work.

Berger claimed in his 2014 book, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*, that we do not live in a secular age, but in a pluralistic age. A sociologist, Berger sees the demise of state religions and an expansion of religiously neutral social spaces, adding that if the First Amendment allows for free religious spaces, people also must be allowed free spaces in their individual consciousnesses. Berger, a Lutheran Christian, mistakenly uses the "two realms" doctrine to separate his core faith, "Christ is Risen," from his "free space" of everyday life.

As a Lutheran, I find myself agreeing with the author of Chapter 3, Roger Olson, who disagrees with Berger's case studies, for example, when the "Popemobile" will not start, Pope Francis does not call an exorcist but a mechanic. Of course! Christians living in a pluralistic society do not just engage in religious rites; their faith permeates every action by a "mind filled with mercy, tolerance, and love of Christ." Furthermore, "secularity" is not ideologically neutral. Luther asked: Who or what do you fear, love, and trust above all? That is your God.

Paul Brink in Chapter 4 raises the important question of how we are to govern people who are willing to kill over matters of religion. We need to see politics as religiously plural. Not only states, but everyone needs to be disestablished. James Skillen in Chapter 5 calls for a principled pluralism. We must deal with "social institutional diversity as well as confessional diversity," one that upholds justice for all citizens regardless of their non-negotiable core beliefs.

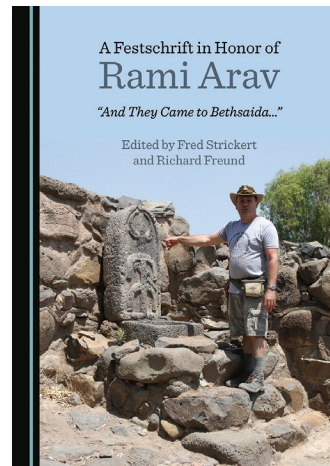
Chapter 7, "Gendered Wrath: Reflections on Anger and Forgiveness," by Ruth Groenhout is excellent. However, it would belong more appropriately in other books edited by Kaye Cook.

Chapters 6 and 8 are welcome global contributions to the book. Thomas Howard explores the history of Hindu Nationalism and present-day challenges to India's Constitution (1950) that says all people "have the right freely to profess, practice and

propagate religion" (Article 25). Ruth M. Melkonian-Hoover pursues women's roles in contemporary Brazil in the years since the Brazilian constitution, post military-rule in 1988, dis-established the Roman Catholic Church as the state church. Through pluralism, evangelicalism (particularly Pentecostalism) has grown; however, machismo remains. Women, although in public, still suffer and the country's fragile democracy struggles.

The book concludes with Kaye Cook, Si-Hua Chang, and Taylor-Marie Funchion using psychological methodology to study Chinese and Brazilian Christians, asking about the "Stranger's Address in Modernizing Cultures." They find that pluralism, rather than bringing "contamination" of basic beliefs, allows for positive integration through cohesiveness of community and shared beliefs. Despite being surrounded by a cacophony of voices, pluralism can be good.

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***A Festschrift in Honor of Rami Arav. "And they came to Bethsaida..."*** Edited by Fred Strickert and Richard Freund. Newcastle Upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-5275-2789-8. 342 pages. Cloth. £64.99; \$99.95.

**T**his volume contains nineteen essays honoring Rami Arav, an Israeli archaeologist who conducted more than thirty campaigns at Bethsaida, a fishing village north of the Sea of Galilee, and the hometown of the apostle Andrew and his brother Peter. The feeding of the 5,000 took place there according to Luke 9:10. No one had excavated the site before Arav, and his organizational and economic resourcefulness are obvious to all. What makes this book of special interest for *Currents* readers is the large role played by Fred Strickert and Walter C. Bouzard in this book, long-time professors, now retired, at Wartburg College. But another Lutheran attracted my attention, Mark Appold, a Lutheran pastor in Kirksville, Missouri, for forty years, who also taught repeatedly at Truman State University. I first met Mark in 1954!

In addition to his teaching and archaeological research, Strickert has been a major force in addressing the Palestinian question. His warm account of how he met Arav helps explain why so many others were attracted to this excavation. But he



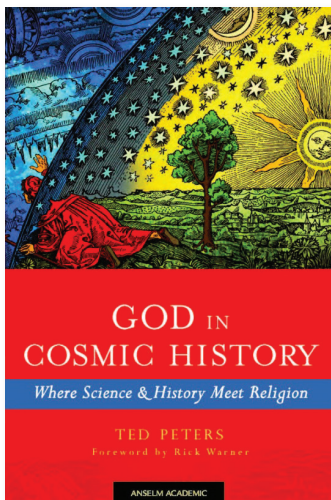
also shows scholarly tenacity in explaining why Philip the Tetrarch, whose capital was at Caesarea Philippi, decided to build a second city called Julia at the site of Bethsaida, in honor of the wife of Augustus, who had died in 29 CE. His article shows the sociological impact of this city and of places like Sepphoris and Tiberias in the first century of the Common Era. Strickert and Richard Freund, a professor at the University of Hartford, are the editors of this volume.

New Testament scholar Appold explains how Andrew became the legendary founding apostle of the Church in the East, as his brother Peter was revered as the head of the Roman Church in the West. Both men called Bethsaida their hometown. Andrew is far more prominent in the Gospel of John than in the Synoptic Gospels. Bethsaida had once been an Aramean stronghold in alliance with the biblical house of David. It is doubtful that Andrew knew much about the prehistory of Bethsaida whose gate was destroyed in the eighth century BCE, probably by Tiglath-pileser III. In the Muratorian Canon Andrew is described as receiving a revelation that John should write down in his own name what we know as the Fourth Gospel. Anonymity characterizes the Gospel of John, where Andrew is one of the “two others” (John 21:2), who played paradoxically a major role in the ministry of Jesus and later in the history of the Church.

Walter Bouzard studies the one Iron Age Hebrew inscription found at Bethsaida consisting of only three letters: m, k, and y. Was Machi a Hebrew? A Moabite? Was he a prisoner of war or an individual indentured to a resident of Geshur?

This volume honors Arav and all the diligent scholars who came to Bethsaida again and again over three decades.

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***God in Cosmic History:  
Where Science and  
History Meet Religion.***

By Ted Peters. Winona, Minn.: Anselm Academic, 2017. ISBN 978-1-5998-2813-8. 356 pages. Paperback. \$39.95.

This is an exhausting and exhaustive book. Ted Peters, Emeritus Professor in Systematic Theology at

Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley and widely published author, demonstrates his active engagement in retirement by reaching for the stars. In this book he engages in what he terms in a later chapter “astrotheology,” informed by the latest thinking in “astrobiology.” These are disciplines that dare to

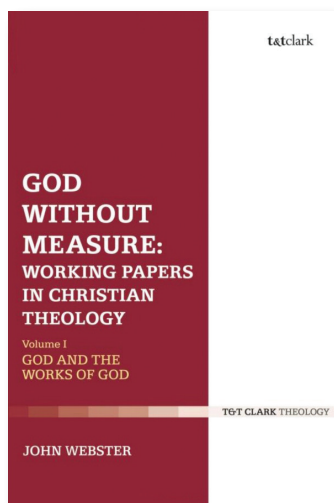
raise what some might label “crackpot” questions, such as, “Do We Share Our Galaxy with Extraterrestrial Neighbors?” Peters argues that this kind of investigation has a hoary heritage about which noted theologians of centuries ago, for example, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), had speculated.

Peters’ intention is to write an accessible introduction to relate science to religion by opening a field he calls “Cosmic History,” which is sufficiently capacious and far-reaching as to allow for the introduction of God-talk into the investigation of the origin and eventual demise of the cosmos. Peters argues for its legitimacy as a necessary broadening and deepening of current investigations being pursued under the rubrics of “World History,” defined as “macro history” that is “transregional, transnational, and transcultural” (17). The scope of Cosmic History needs to be related to an even larger and novel conception of history which has taken the name of “Big History,” which seeks to place human history in the context of its biological origins arising out of the onset of life and the origin of the cosmos in the Big Bang and all that followed. Because “Big History” refuses to allow the God question within its purview, “Cosmic History” necessarily offers a larger perspective that needs to be admitted to the conversation, especially in light of the “axial revolution” in religion that occurred within human history roughly 25 centuries ago in China, India, the Middle East, and Greece. These roughly contemporaneous breakthroughs eventuated in what we consider today the major “world religions” including Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and by derivation, Christianity and Islam.

Peters relies heavily on the influential work of sociologist Robert Bellah and philosophers Eric Vogelin, Karl Jaspers, and Charles Taylor as well as numerous theologians, among whom Paul Tillich is the most often cited. Central to Peters’ argument is a theistic acceptance of the Darwinian theory of evolution and its relevance to the development of the axial religions as laid out in Bellah’s influential *Religion in Human Evolution from the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011).

While the wide-ranging topics that comprise the 21 chapters of the book will stretch most readers, Peters has taken great care in keeping his material and arguments accessible and well-evidenced by myriad footnotes. He clearly hopes the book will find use in classes and study groups, since each chapter ends with a series of review and discussion questions as well as annotated print and web sources that serve as bibliography. Peters has produced a challenging offering that will reward the patient reader with many new insights into cutting-edge issues arising between science and religion.

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***God without Measure:  
Working Papers in  
Christian Theology:  
Volume I: God and the  
Works of God.***

By John Webster. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018. ISBN: 978-0-5676-8251-2. viii & 231 pages. Paper. \$39.95.

This volume, which was originally published just

before the untimely death of the author, is a collection of essays or “working papers” (4). With the exception of chapters one and three, these essays are found in various edited works and journals, though the author has taken the effort with the publication of this volume to modify many of the titles.

In the first chapter, Webster, setting the tone for the rest of the book, offers a brief foray in *prolegomena* (that is, introductory matters). He argues that “dogmatics considers God absolutely and relatively before moving to treat all the other elements” of theology (7); this means God is considered ontologically and economically. Moving away from Karl Barth and closer to Thomas Aquinas, Webster argues that God’s economic activity is obscured without reference to God’s being and processions.

Following this, the author divides the book into two main sections: (1) “God in Himself” and (2) “God’s Outer Works.” This volume concludes with a chapter in which the author prompts theologians to think of theology primarily as a theological endeavor; that is, “a recovery of *sacra doctrina* in its full sense” (224). Given the depth of content, we only can highlight a few notable features to give the reader a sense of the whole.

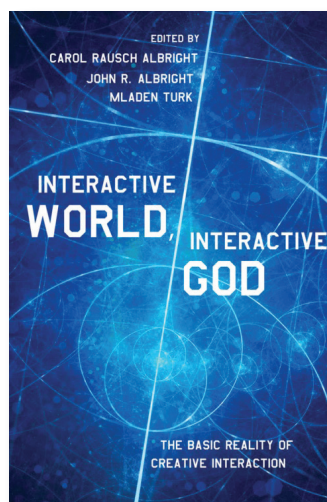
In the second chapter, Webster presents the case for understanding the aseity of God in a manner that takes full account of its “proper trinitarian setting” (27). This, he argues, avoids the error of a cosmological drift in the articulation of the doctrine, a drift that would render aseity as God’s independence and “philosophical apologetics for natural religion.” Rather, he contends that aseity is God’s life in himself, which includes the mutuality that exists between the Father and the Son.

In chapter seven, Webster explores the doctrine of creation, offering the fascinating suggestion that creation “is a work of wholly adequate love” on the part of God (110). In the twelfth chapter, the author offers a powerful look at ecclesiology: “[T]he church does not possess its social properties after the manner of other societies ... [it is] the society which keeps us in God’s society” (193).

This is clearly a work of theological depth that one would expect of a theologian of Webster’s stature. Though his arguments are often intricate, his well-crafted prose reveals a theolo-

gian who had an obvious love for God and the church. Moreover, these “working papers” when taken together, offer the reader a coherent overall presentation. In sum, these mature offerings by Webster are worth working through and wrestling with for the interested churchperson, pastor, or Christian educator, who is not wary of the deep theological waters.

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***Interactive World,  
Interactive God:  
The Basic Reality of  
Creative Interaction.***

Edited by Carol Rausch Albright, John R. Albright, and Mladen Turk. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-4982-9388-4. xvi & 256 pages. Paper. \$32.55.

Studying interactions in the world and between the world and God can lead to interaction between science and theology. Here is an entree to that enterprise.

After Carol Rausch Albright’s introduction, John Albright begins with interactions in the physical sciences. Two billiard balls interact by colliding and moving in new directions. But common-sense pictures become inadequate. An electron and positron collide and become photons, interacting to become something different. Qualitatively new phenomena, like water’s wetness and life, emerge in many body systems.

Grace Wolf-Chase expands our view, sketching physical interactions seen in processes of cosmic evolution. She notes that astronomy and astrophysics themselves involve interactions among observation, technology, and theory, and even between science and art.

Symbiosis is one type of biological interaction. Martinez Hewlett takes that in an unexpected direction with “endosymbiosis,” one organism dwelling inside another. Mitochondria that play a vital role in our cells are an example. They have their own DNA, and there is evidence that their ancestors were engulfed a billion years ago by other cells as a major step in evolutionary history. This suggests that slow processes of genetic change are not the whole story of evolution.

Ecology expands our vision to interactions among different species. Paul Heltne looks closely at the ecology of the soil, noting the multitudes of bacteria and other tiny creatures below a square meter of earth’s surface and the plants growing in it.



Humans can become part of this ecosystem and interact with it in sustainable or exploitative ways. Sandra Ham considers a larger ecosystem, a stretch of Atlantic rainforest along Brazil's coast. She gives special attention to one monkey species among thousands of plant and animal species to illustrate the interactions. Again, humans have had negative and positive impacts.

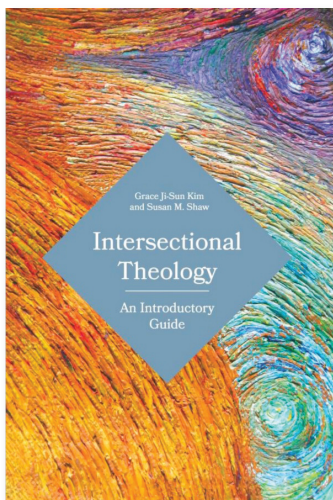
Michael Spezio's "Brains, Minds, and Persons" is a fairly intense treatment of what we know from current neuroscience research. I cannot do it justice in a brief review, but the emphasis on different types of interactions and their consequences are helpful in view of reductionist claims made by some brain researchers. Philip Gorski then explores the role of interactions in constructing a social ontology. A social structure is its persons, symbols, and artifacts, plus relations between them, relations that change what they are and their relationships.

Focus on interaction in theology begins with Mladen Turk's reflections on the evolutions of science and of religion and their interactions. Mary Gerhart then explores "The mystical dimension of divine-human interaction." It is not surprising to encounter T.S. Eliot, but Einstein, Dirac, and Monod are surprises.

Joseph Bracken accepts the challenge of making belief in resurrection of entire persons plausible without appeal to bare divine omnipotence. He responds with critical use of Whitehead's process thought. Surprisingly, this is the only place in the book that mentions God as Trinity. Finally, Ted Peters "hacks the religious mind" by ascending the pyramid of consciousness from sensory interaction on the ground floor to abstract ideas at the pinnacle. Here we encounter the concept of the ultimate, God. God cannot be grasped by thought but can be loved, and that love can interact with lower levels of consciousness.

*George Murphy*

*Physicist and Retired ELCA Pastor*



***Intersectional Theology:  
An Introductory Guide.***

By Grace Ji-Sun Kim  
and Susan M. Shaw.  
Minneapolis: Fortress,  
2018. ISBN: 978-1-  
5064-4609-7. xix & 129  
pages. Paper. \$29.00.

**I**n their new book, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide*, Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw collaborate to provide a much-

needed resource for theologians and church leaders working to understand and incorporate intersectionality as a lens for their work. As popular as it is often misunderstood, intersectionality

is a vital resource for theological work and reflection today. This short and accessible introductory text is a welcome companion.

Kim and Shaw provide a clear and understandable history of intersectionality, a term coined within recent decades, including its grounding in previous centuries of black women's writing and experience. One of the key points while introducing the concept is that "its roots are firmly in a tradition of black feminist thought that [has] roots in black women's activism" (4). This highlights the necessity of citing and drawing upon the wisdom of black women writers and activists whenever intersectionality is invoked. From Sojourner Truth to Audre Lorde to Patricia Hill Collins, Kim and Shaw make explicit the genealogy of a concept that many seem to equate with diversity. They make clear that intersectionality is not mere diversity. Intersectionality is a theory of structural and personal power, biased toward justice, and attending to shifting relationships with regard to multiple aspects of human identity.

After a detailed introduction to intersectionality, including clearly described core concepts and commitments, Kim and Shaw show how biography plays an essential role in this theory and method. Using their own stories as case studies, they demonstrate how and why intersectionality has resonance with theology. Insofar as faith and religious practice are personal experiences, with theology in continual conversation with these experiences, the use of biography becomes an essential tool. As they describe it, "intersectional theology makes room for the specific, the idiosyncratic, the overlooked and marginalized that may be speaking in God's still, small voice" (19). Attention to narrative and biography is one way to inhabit this space and understand "simultaneously experienced multiple social locations" (2).

Kim and Shaw demonstrate how intersectionality functions as a method for doing theology by posing fourteen questions that emerge from its "kaleidoscopic" approach to understanding the multiplicity of identities, shifting power relations, and institutional structures (2). The questions help readers see the concrete difference intersectionality can make for doing theology. For example, the basic starting point is "how does my own social location affect how I look at issues?" (49). This is why understanding one's own biography is an essential preparatory step for doing intersectional theology. Another question is: "how does this idea reproduce or challenge inequities?" (57). This highlights the way intersectionality always draws our attention to power, how it is organized and distributed, and always moves toward more equity in relationships and organizations.

Ultimately, Kim and Shaw turn their attention to theology and the Bible to show precise examples of what differences intersectionality can make for faith and religious practice. The concept of God is one case where they name traditional views of the divine as perfect, static, and unchanging, while offering an alternative: "If, however, we apply the logics of intersectionality, we can think of God as multiple, divergent, and contradictory, encompassing the totality of diverse experience. In this way, God is both/and, more rich and complex and nuanced than our

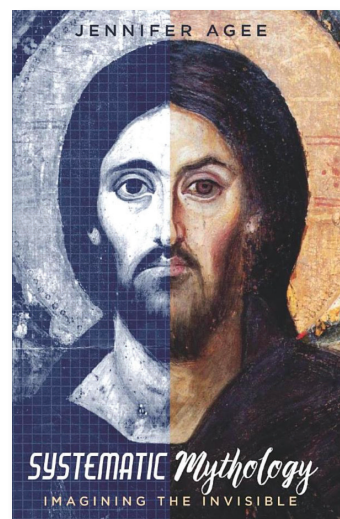


either/or theologies that posit a fixed and singular identity for God” (67).

In connection with this, they discuss how intersectionality can be a helpful method for biblical interpretation: “Recognizing these histories of reading and employing Scripture to maintain power and dominance, we recognize the urgent need to read Scripture through the lens of intersectionality” (75-76). Attention to power by listening to diverse and complex voices, both in the text and in the readers of the text, is made explicit in this approach.

The book concludes with a brief discussion of intersectionality’s effect on individuals and on communities, including discussion of the sacraments, ordination, and worship practices. Here the book gains relevance for those engaged in church life. Each chapter concludes with discussion questions that not only help the individual reader but serve small group discussion. The book works very effectively in teaching undergraduates about intersectionality as a key method and theory. It can help readers to see the relevance and resonances with theology, including the study and practice of religion today.

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***Systematic Mythology:  
Imagining the Invisible.***

By Jennifer Agee.  
Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-5326-4816-8. xi & 128 pages. Paperback. \$19.00.

In this short and readable work, Agee makes a strong case for the role of mythology in human life and Christian theology. Throughout the book, the rigorous logic of systematic theology interacts with the expansive nature of myth and metaphor in salutary ways, inviting readers to deepen both their logical and poetic understandings of God, self, and creation.

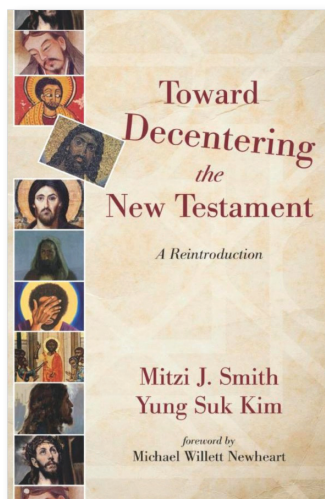
Developed initially as a master’s thesis, *Systematic Mythology* demonstrates familiarity with relevant thinkers such as Ernest Becker, George MacDonald, Kirsten Jeffrey Johnson, C.S. Lewis, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich. Agee also provides ample exploration of scripture, as she puts her theological project into practice through lively biblical interpretation. Engaging the question of what it means to believe in a creator, for instance, she writes, “Unlike our personal narratives and constructions, unlike our idols, the true God is our creator: the only one with the power to justify, and the only god who does not need our

service. ‘If I were hungry, I would not tell you!’” (26, citing Psalm 50:12a). With such observations, Agee presents a way of doing theology that is simultaneously grounding, challenging, liberating, and creative.

The chapters move naturally from introduction to concepts like *logos* and *mythos*, to exploration of the meaning of signs and symbols, to more active construction of images, imagination, mythmaking, and theology. Several appendices give examples of how Agee has used this theological framework in poems, reflections, and essays, including one essay published in *Currents in Theology and Mission* and two pieces that appeared in *Transpositions*, the online journal of the Institutes for Theology, Imagination and the Arts.

This book will be a good resource for readers—including young adults—who are interested in connecting art with theology. Amid today’s scientific, postmodern, and seeking contexts, it truly gives space for serious reflection on the Word of God and what it means to look for, find, and participate in lives of holy significance.

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***Toward Decentering  
the New Testament:  
A Reintroduction.***

By Mitzi J. Smith and Yung Suk Kim. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-5326-0465-2. x & 376 pages. Paperback. \$44.00.

Mitzi Smith is the J. Davison Philips Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, and Yung Suk Kim is Associate Professor of NT and Early Christianity at Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, Virginia Union University. Both authors have produced several books on biblical interpretation. Both have also spent years teaching at predominately nonwhite schools. Finally, both are biblical scholars who identify as an African American (Smith) and an Asian-American (Kim). These considerations make the authors well credentialed to offer this book, “an introductory [NT] text that focuses on and prioritizes diverse and nonwhite readers and contemporary issues that affect real flesh-and-blood minoritized readers” (3). For the authors, *Toward Decentering* is not just another textbook: it is a work “our souls call us to do” in resistance to a status quo “that systematically or routinely silences the concerns of nonwhite communities and the scholarship they

service. ‘If I were hungry, I would not tell you!’” (26, citing Psalm 50:12a). With such observations, Agee presents a way of doing theology that is simultaneously grounding, challenging, liberating, and creative.





produce” (4).

At first glance, the book looks like most NT introductory textbooks: it has an introduction and bibliography, chapters on historical and interpretive issues, and chapters dedicated to each NT writing (or group of writings). What distinguishes it, however, are the interpretive voices and emphases it prioritizes, the distinctive readings it offers, and the explicit interest it shows in contemporary justice issues.

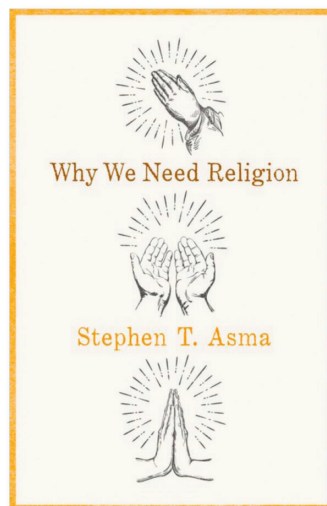
For example, Chapter 1 (on biblical interpretation) emphasizes interpretation as a give-and-take dialogue (vs. objective exegesis), every reading as contextual and limited (vs. universal), and diversity (vs. uniformity) of interpretive voices as divinely inspired (11–23), since “Nobody’s reading or interpretation is objective or scientific” (15). The ensuing chapters (2–8) address historical and cultural realities, but in relationship to contemporary concerns. For instance, Chapter 4 (“Refugees, Immigrants, and Foreigners in the NT”) and Chapter 7 (“The Privatization of Water, Ancient Rome, and the NT”) both begin with pressing global challenges to policies on immigration and water access before exploring historical realities. This approach makes these chapters feel less like historical survey for history’s sake (which is not always a page-turner) and more like selected windows into the NT world that pertain especially to today.

The chapters on NT writings (chaps 9–34) are concise (4 to 34 pages each), organized thematically, and supplemented by reading aids (bulleted lists, outlines, summaries, sidebars with discussion questions). Though the chapters cover mainstream interpretive issues (structure, themes), they use language that intersects with contemporary experiences (e.g., Matthew’s Jesus as “Colonized Political Revolutionary Prophet”) and they strive to correct flawed interpretive traditions of Euro-American scholarship. For instance, they argue “justification” is better rendered “justice” (69, 249–250), Paul is not apolitical (216–218), and Paul is complicit in wrongdoing by silencing Onesimus’s voice and agency (276–277). Each chapter begins with quotes by nonwhite voices, from scholars to cultural icons. Though Smith and Kim occasionally collaborate in writing chapters, most are authored by one or the other. Every chapter lists extensive “Further Reading” resources.

*Toward Decentering* is a concise but informed introduction to the NT writings that challenges many conventional (white male) interpretive trajectories, showcases minoritized voices, and models a compelling blend of substance with collegiality and humility. For these reasons, I expect it will soon be widely used as a textbook in seminary, divinity school, and university settings—and rightly so. Traditional readers will take issue with some of the authors’ interpretations. By way of examples, I find Kim’s reading of “the faith of Christ” exceptionally focused on the human response (68–69, 212–213, 249–250), and I would have liked more elaboration from Smith on the faithful use of wealth (155, 299) and from both authors on the distinctiveness of scripture (17–18). But these are precisely the kinds of things

that make this NT introduction refreshingly different. Indeed, because of these very distinctives, I am contemplating how I may use *Toward Decentering* in my own courses.

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### **Why We Need Religion.**

By Stephen T. Asma.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-0-1904-6967-2.  
264 pages. Cloth.  
\$29.95.

This is a hard book to categorize and evaluate. The author, trained as a philosopher, portrays himself as something of a religious historian with interests in neuroscience and psychology and has

status as a “Senior Fellow of the Research Group in Mind, Science, and Culture at Columbia College of Chicago” where he is also Professor of Philosophy.

The book itself is a well-argued and footnoted defense of its title’s claim, especially in the face of the “new atheist” pillorying of religion as a threat to human existence. Asma marshals what he understands to be overwhelming scientific evidence on how religions serve as “cultural analgesics” in the evolutionary quest for human survival. Turning Marx on his head, Asma claims that religion indeed serves as an “opiate of the people” and that is a good thing, inasmuch as religious opiates serve a “palliative” function in allowing human beings to endure in the face of painful and threatening challenges.

Take the fear of death, for example, what he calls “the most obvious area where religion traditionally offers a unique therapeutic balm.” “No one wants to die,” he avers and then goes on to make the exaggerated claim, “and religion says you don’t have to” which makes religion a “powerful analgesic” (167). Rather than evincing any interest in religions’ various (and sometimes competing) truth claims, Asma, a self-avowed agnostic of Buddhist leanings, is solely interested in religions’ emotional value in helping humans cope and perdure in the evolutionary struggle for existence.

Many of his examples function analogous to the mysterious ways the so-called “placebo effect” asserts itself in medicine. These “lies that heal,” as one historian of science called them, are often as effective in healing or analgesic effect as the actual medications and treatments designed to give the same positive result. Prayer, not surprisingly, is one such age-old treatment shown to



have such palliative agency. For all his “renaissance man” authorial aura, however, one area where Asma seems peculiarly lacking is a basic theological grounding, which one might have assumed from someone claiming to have spent his childhood as a Catholic altar boy.

Nowhere does Asma ever explore even the suspicion that religion, from some authentically “religious” points of view, is not something we humans “do.” The vector of religion does not point from us humans to God and the gods but rather from the transcendent Other to us humans, to which humans may or may not respond. This, of course, is a subtle point which does not gainsay Asma that much religious behavior may be palliative in character. But as Luther made clear, much “religious” behavior is also idolatrous and done in bad faith, not at all serving genuine human or godly ends.

As Asma says in summary, “The old saw ‘that there are no atheists in foxholes,’ obviously doesn’t prove that there is a God. It just proves that highly emotional beings (i.e., humans) are also highly vulnerable beings.” In Asma’s neuroscientific terms, “there are aspects of religion . . . that go straight into the limbic system and quell the adrenalin-based metabolic overdrive of stress” (212). Perhaps this book might find a place on your self-help religion shelf?

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The journal, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, is published four times per year: January, April, July, and October. Ad deadlines for each issue are one month prior to publication (December 1, March 1, June 1, September 1). Late submissions may be published in the next issue. Issue-specific themes are available from the co-editors: [Craig Nesson](#) and [Kadi Billman](#).

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