

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Key Thinkers in the Sociology of Religion* by Richard K. Fenn.

London and New York: Continuum, 2009. 250pp. pb.

£19.99. ISBN-13: 978-0-8264-9942-4

**Reviewed by Derek Tidball**

In some respects the title of this book, written by a doyen in the field, is misleading. The title implies an introductory textbook and the definition of 'sociology of religion' is open to wide interpretation. Whatever one expects, Richard Fenn has written an extended essay on the sacred, using a number of major sociologists of religion to aid his reflections.

As with any book with a title like this, the first question one asks is who does the author consider to be the 'key thinkers'? The answer to this question is fairly predictable, but not altogether so. Alongside Durkheim, Freud, Weber, Parsons, Martin, Wilson and Berger, Fenn also includes chapters on Luhmann, Geertz, Block and Catherine Bell. The latter chapters indicate his perspective on the sociology of religion for the last three are social anthropologists rather than sociologists. The author pushes the boundaries of sociology of religion, perhaps necessarily so, and does not confine it to contemporary religion in modern or postmodern societies. His vision is broad and his judgements catholic, as when he writes that Catherine Bell, whose work has been devoted to the understanding of ritual in Chinese religion and culture, that in his opinion she is 'the outstanding contemporary American historian and sociologist of religion'.

It is certainly difficult to sociologize about contemporary religion without resort to Geertz's work and the boundary between sociology and social anthropology is inevitably fluid. But by choosing to explore the theme of the sacred, Fenn is constrained in his choice of 'key thinkers' and necessarily includes those whose work is relevant. His introduction makes clear that he wants the reader to think about what 'the sacred' means but as a starting point he states 'the sacred represents a crisis that has emerged, been confronted, and transcended. What might have happened, chaos, dissent, subversion, disloyalty, even death, has been endured: its worst and most lasting effects averted, new possibilities discovered, and the future

initiated.' He accepts the element of crisis is not always transparent but that the sacred may be dealing with a memory of a crisis past. Religion is the social institution that manifests and organizes the observance of the sacred. He is cautious about approaches to the sacred that dwell on the transcendent, which he discusses at some length, because much managing of the sacred is more mundane. The sacred 'constitutes the hard assets underlying the promises of the currency of religion to pay for old losses and to fulfil old longings.'

With this as an orientation, Fenn sets off to explore the 'key thinkers' he has selected. His discussion of them is dense and his conversation with their writings flows back and forth. Although he occasionally uses some telling metaphors and illustrations, for the most part the argument demands the reader's undivided attention. Each chapter begins with a brief biographical sketch and ends with a short, selective bibliography. Otherwise there are few signposts and no summary statements or conclusion.

The perspective leads to an extremely valuable exploration of a theme which is too often foolishly taken for granted. Within the overall perspective Fenn has the more particular interest of exploring what the implications of the key thinkers' understanding of the sacred are for the concept of secularization.

This is not an introductory textbook that would comprehensively set out the writings of the key thinkers. By viewing their writings from the standpoint of the sacred it is very selective. For example, only three writings of Wilson are listed which concentrate on his work on millenarianism and 'the noble savages' and this is then related to secularisation through his *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. The same is true of other authors. By choosing this theme much of the broader work of contemporary sociology of religion and other key thinkers are ignored.

This is a serious work, written in a style which the author clearly hopes will make its readers engage and think through the issues for themselves. He often shows a classical scholarly diffidence about his verdicts. It is consistent with this that the chapters often end abruptly and that there is no attempt at the end to summarize, to revisit the position set out in the introduction, or reflect on the theme in any coherent manner. The

reader is made to do the work and, sadly, I suspect many undergraduates will find that they are not equipped to do so.

*Derek Tidball is a sociologist of religion and former Principal of London School of Theology.*

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*The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism*, by J.P. Moreland. London, UK: SCM Press, 2009.

ix+210pp. pb. £40.00. ISBN-13: 978-0-334-04215-0

**Reviewed by Stephen M. Vantassel**

Ever since Darwin's theory of evolution removed any substantive distinction between humans and animals, some adherents of naturalism have condemned theological notions of soul, dignity of humanity, and even ethics, as little more than convenient lies used to control behavior. The effect of the Naturalist's worldview has been to undermine traditional views of humanity's role in the world and the meaning of life. If Naturalism is correct, then atheists have a powerful argument against theism and Christianity in particular.

Christian philosopher, J.P. Moreland, however, remains unconvinced by Naturalist claims and suggests there are powerful reasons for believing the Naturalists have failed to prove their case. Moreland says there are several uncooperative facts or ideas that fail to accord with a materialistic view of human nature. The book contains his discussion of five of these uncooperative facts; each being dealt with in its own chapter. In chapter 2, Moreland carefully shows that Naturalism is unable to provide an acceptable explanation for our notion of human consciousness. The next chapter engages the problem of human will and how the determinism inherent in Naturalism fails to fit the facts of our experience. Chapter 4 contains a discussion on how Naturalism undermines the notion of rationality because it cannot ever justify that what works (i.e. successful in an evolutionary sense) is, also in fact, true. Those familiar with Plantinga's treatment of this line of argument should enjoy Moreland's favorable comments. The problem of the soul and the question of whether

matter can “think” is discussed in chapter 5. The last chapter delves into the issue of morality and human dignity. Moreland provides 7 arguments for why Naturalism cannot sustain the notion of objective morality. Perhaps more frightening is learning the threat Naturalism poses to the belief in human rights.

The book concludes with an appendix containing Moreland’s response to Thomas Nagel’s attempt to employ a dismissive strategy against those who claim reason derives from a source outside of nature. Like a shrewd defense attorney, Moreland takes Nagel’s position apart, demonstrating that Nagel failed to provide a complete answer and therefore did not meet the burden of proof for his position. In this way, Moreland avoids having to destroy Nagel’s argument (a more difficult task), choosing instead simply to defang it.

Christians should be grateful for this book as it demonstrates that Christian notions of an immaterial aspect of the human person have rational support. Moreland’s work should also give us pause before rushing to reinterpret Scripture or rewrite Christian theology to accord with contemporary scientific “facts.” But as important as this book is, readers should be cautioned about the complexity of the material. Moreland is a top level philosopher. He spends much ink on nuanced definitions and technical issues that will require careful reading if not familiarity with the broader literature.

I have only two criticisms or disappointments with this text. First, the inclusion of a detailed summary of the main arguments of the chapter would have helped readers follow the complex and lengthy arguments being made, thereby making the subject matter more accessible to a wider audience. Second, I wished Moreland took up the question of how humans differ from animals. With the regrettable rise of the animal rights movement, some may use Moreland’s arguments regarding will, consciousness etc. to suggest that human ethics can, and should, be applied to animals. Perhaps, Moreland will take up that question in future work.

*Stephen M. Vantassel is Lecturer in Theology at King’s Evangelical Divinity School. United Kingdom.*

*The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*, by Graham Ward. London: SCM Press/ Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009. 304pp. pb. £25.00. ISBN-13: 978-0-334-04350-8.

**Reviewed by Annie Vocature Bullock**

The epigraph to Graham Ward's book, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*, is a quotation from Johannes B. Metz calling for a theology engaged with the world, where the world comprises both the political and social order. According to Metz, this is a political theology and this is the template for Ward's book. To this Ward adds an ethical dimension. Though it is not a practical guide to action, the book sets discipleship in its proper context, as fully invested in the political realm. The result is a frequently insightful account of what it means to be a Christian in a postmaterial age.

The book's strength is its clarity of purpose. Although some readers will find the book's title misleading, Ward is clear in his introduction that his intention is primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive. The first half delineates the "the City," a concept Ward has developed further elsewhere, by identifying five interrelated characteristics or trends: postdemocracy, globalization, postmateriality, the new visibility of religion, and postsecularity.<sup>1</sup> The second half of the book is intended to reformulate a "Christian theological imaginary" capable of responding to and challenging the "civic imaginary" articulated in the book's first half (17). Thus rather than outlining concrete political action, he articulates the contours of the current political context as the backdrop for contemporary Christian discipleship.

Both halves of the book contain astute observations. In the first half, Ward's discussion of the new visibility of religion is particularly keen. Against the assertion that ours is an age of secularization, Ward sees a resurgence of religion in the public sphere. Far from a return of traditional religion, this refers to a new "religiousness that is hybrid, fluid, and commercialized" (131). The discussion that follows raises an impressive and convincing array of evidence for Ward's thesis, ranging from the

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<sup>1</sup> Ward refers the reader to *Cities of God*. London: Routledge, 2001.

rhetoric of religion following 9/11 to Rowling's Harry Potter series (131-154). In the second half, Ward questions the theological value of "tolerance," which he argues implicitly depoliticizes Christian theology. In place of tolerance, he calls for "a theologically grounded respect for the human person," (162) an idea built on a theology of the image of God, which he develops later (221-260). The result is a theologically informed re-politicization of Christian discipleship that identifies and challenges "tolerance" as part of the anemia of mainline liberal Christianity.

Although the reader is rewarded by these insights, the impact of Ward's ideas is sometimes marred by the inaccessibility of his writing. Ward is by turns lucid and obscure, which makes for a rather frustrating reading experience. He is capable of brief but incisive statements that summarize his points. For example, addressing the new visibility of religion, he remarks that "religion has become a special effect, inseparably bound to an entertainment value" (149). The remark is a pithy crystallization of his exploration of religion in popular media. In other places, however, his meaning is far more difficult to follow. As an example, in his discussion of virtual immateriality, Ward writes:

Freedom of choice is harnessed to movement, albeit in an illusory manner—illusory because to choose is not to move—and where one moves to (whether we can talk of "movement" at all) when space has collapsed into an indifference with respect to directions and locations is a real question (102-103).

Insofar as I understand his point, Ward means to correlate choice and the navigation of cyberspace but clearly a less sinuous sentence structure might have been preferable. Because there is evidence that Ward is capable of making himself clearer, I cannot help but think of this as a missed opportunity to communicate more effectively with his audience.

There is still a significant contribution here in the very shape of the project. Ward insists on the necessity of clear, detailed, and reasoned description of the intellectual and political trends of our time as a prelude to theological construction. Often politically engaged theologies take a narrower view of context than Ward does, addressing only those issues or trends which are pertinent to an already established theological argument.

Here, however, the theological response overflows from a deep attention to the context. This not only allows the theologian to issue a relevant challenge to the world, but it allows for a reconsideration of the way developments in theology have been shaped by these same trends—for better or worse.

This proposal has real merit as an approach to the work of political theology. Producing a description of the political and social order requires attention to several things. It is a way to name human frailty and need. It is a way to discover the Holy Spirit already at work in the world. Finally, it frees the Christian disciple from the shackles of an unconsidered politics. This final point is where Ward begins, namely with the need “to establish a new tradition of theological disputation” (33). This new tradition must not be fettered by the strictures of politeness but rather it must be free to stake out an unapologetically Christian position in relationship to the world. This is the meaning of a politics of discipleship.

*Annie Bullock is Adjunct Instructor at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest.*

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*Through A Lens Darkly. How the News Media Perceive and Portray Evangelicals*, by David M. Haskell. Toronto: Clements Academic, 2009. 289pp. pb. \$24.95. ISBN-13: 978-1-894667-92-0

**Reviewed by Wayne G. Smith**

Thanks to David M. Haskell's *Through A Lens Darkly*, there is for the first time (he tells us so on number of occasions) quantifiable social-research evidence of the thought-worlds of the media in their interaction with evangelicals, confirming the effects of their convergence. The findings? The media see and therefore reflect evangelicals as, at best, alien to (journalists' definitions of) Canadian culture and at worst offensive (to the journalists' own social agenda).

Haskell offers some suggestions for communication improvement to media practitioners (hire some religion specialists) and to evangelicals (be more like his version of Jesus). The author's attempts at homiletics come

as a surprise but they do not detract from the lessons found in the research findings.

The bulk of the research deals with television but a section on newspapers does not reveal significant variance from the generally dismissive attitude of Canadian media toward - and consequently negative portrayals of - evangelicals. In the news-gathering process, when it comes to evangelical perspectives, all media outlets give short shrift to the last of the hallowed traditional media Five W's (who, what, when, where, and *why*) because the evangelical rationale for action is faith - something which mainstream media would rather ignore or diminish.

Haskell, an associate professor of journalism and contemporary studies (Wilfred Laurier) explains that journalists' radar is tuned to negativity, ease and speed of comprehensibility, the unexpected, elite personalities or significant numbers, and that which can be reduced to a battle between individuals. He admits that it is difficult to render a faith statement down to a sound bite or newspaper 'lead' (first paragraph). He allows for some exceptions in media attention spans.

The surveys reveal that Canadian journalists hold views which are at variance not only with that of evangelicals but the majority of the Canadian population, but this does little to mitigate negative portrayals of evangelicals by news media.

The evangelical obligation to share the faith, support an objective, external standard of personal and social behaviour and thought, the expectation that one's faith should inform social and political ends are all perspectives which are interpreted negatively by the largely secular humanist Canadian media. Evangelicals are perceived as haughty, intolerant, psychological blackmailers, arrogant, self-righteous, politically threatening, somewhat un-Canadian, slightly unintelligent and undeserving of positive media bias. Haskell's research template sets those categories as the terms to which respondents aligned themselves on sliding scales.

Haskell observes that evangelical Christians are not univocal on all Biblical or societal issues but homosexual relationships, abortion and the roles of women emerge from the research as definitive issues on either side of Haskell's metaphorical lens. Journalists tend to be passionate advocates for all of the above.



The surveys reveal that semantics holds the key to media portrayals. For example, the word *tolerance* has different meanings in the hearts of evangelicals than in that of most media practitioners: to the former, it means being willing to disagree and to accept that one holds one's truth to be...well, true at the existential (and spiritual) exclusion of competing truths. In the culture of media newsrooms the word means that there is no absolute standard for truth but rather everyone's perspective is not only equally valid but to be equally weighted. In the media, any view that excludes any other is to be ridiculed and dismissed or even held in contempt (except, of course, the media view that all truth is relative). The mere suggestion that a faith perspective may call upon one to consider a sheep-and-goats parable is anathema to the media. (Although they do not hold their own judgemental nature to be a problem.) In the media there are "cues" (persuasive, shallow, appearance-over-substance words), and then there are "arguments" (facts, evidence) which take more media effort.

Part of evangelicals' communication problem, says the author, is that the central text (the Bible) is used to describe and validate itself. While self-evident to a Bible-believer, when encountered by non-evangelicals such proof-texting has the same persuasive impotence and illegitimacy as that of a sports team being allowed to call their own penalties. He does not make the same call concerning his use of St Paul.

The books' arrangement is helpful. The first half of the book unravels definitions of news (objective vs. socially constructed, agenda setting and the ways in which attitudes and presumptions help establish frames into which ideas and actions are defined.) Central chapters contain the actual research. The concluding chapters supportively explain the 'why' of media perspectives and includes his offer of 'fixes'. Two appendices contain researchers' guidebook and blank survey-instrument answer sheets.) The bulk of the book has been published elsewhere but this collection aligns them, setting the stage for his closing observations and further publications.

Unfortunately for the evangelical reader, the book proper ends abruptly on a tone that contrasts his claim to social-science objectivity. Referring to the Canadian courts' inclusion of legalized same-sex relationships under the term 'marriage,' he reveals, and confirms, the survey-supported dismissive media attitude to evangelicals in his closing:

"...[E]vangelicals would be wise to 'forever hold their peace' and simply move on."

He tries his hand at theological language and unwittingly reveals an (undefined) denominational perspective: "Will they [evangelicals] put their faith in the transformative power of legislation or in the transformative power of personal example? ...Given the worth of Christianity lies in its ability to change lives, not legislation, I feel that there has been an error in emphasis (214)."

This assertion is curious in a Canadian context, given that evangelical faith-based commitments have historically driven transformative political advances in general education, health care, prison reform, economics and other legislation. He posits that the cultural primacy of Christianity (admittedly nominal in many cases) in Canada began its downward slide in the tumultuous '60s and that slide given momentum by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982. (He does not mention that the historic document's Preface acknowledges, therefore enshrining, the peoples' belief in God (although a precise definition of deity is left open.)

The author dips his toe in theological concepts when he reveals his own understanding of the edict to which evangelicals should give evidence: believing in the risen Christ, en masse, and giving witness to compassion, humility, unconditional forgiveness and anti-materialism (222). Contrary to his own assertion, this faith confession is not quite the most profound observation.

The most profound reference which speaks through this work is actually found just two verses before the author's opening proof-text of I Cor 13:12 (KJV). It poses one of a reporter's classic Five W's: *When* might the media lens be truly clear for evangelicals? Haskell's own pericope in context answers: When that which is perfect is come (I Cor 13:10, KJV).

Until that perfection comes, media practitioners could encounter some hermeneutical epiphanies through Haskell's work. The general news consumer will find some surprises here.

For the evangelical striving to live out the Great Commission, a journey *Through A Lens Darkly* will certainly clear the windscreen.

*Wayne G. Smith, a former journalist, is a pastor of The United Church of Canada and a doctoral research student at the University of Pretoria.*

*The Political Dimension of Reconciliation: A Theological Analysis of Ways of Dealing with Guilt During the Transition to Democracy in South Africa and (East) Germany*, by Ralf K. Wüstenberg.

Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 2009. 458pp. pb. \$50.00. 978-0-8028-2824-8.

**Reviewed by Geoffrey Troughton**

Forgiveness and reconciliation are never easy. Neither is the relationship between theological and political conceptions of these terms. Ralf Wüstenberg's study examines the political dimension of reconciliation in dialogue with an assessment of the ideas, context and practice of two parliamentary commissions of reconciliation: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in post-Apartheid South Africa, and the Investigative Commission (EK) established following the fall of Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. The author is a Protestant theologian with a particular interest in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and with first-hand knowledge of both countries. This background enriches an impressively detailed, reflective and critical engagement.

Wüstenberg's analysis proceeds from the premise that reconciliation is a central Christian theme, and that it appears prominently in both political and theological discourse. But what is the extent and nature of correspondence between political and theological conceptions of the term? Political attempts to reconcile social breaches can appear reminiscent to theological reconciliation, since both deal with guilt and aim to re-establish friendship or community. Yet the actual correspondence between theological and political claims, conceptions and practices cannot be taken for granted. As Wüstenberg demonstrates, these questions of correspondence may be critically important but the answers are not at all straightforward.

Wüstenberg's treatment of the problem is dense and thorough. Though not easy to read, it unfolds in an ordered and systematic fashion. The book is organised in three sections, dealing variously with introductory matters, analysis of the two case studies, and a final theological commentary on reconciliation in the political arena in light of the preceding analysis. The first and shortest section deals with preliminary considerations pertaining primarily to methodology. Here Wüstenberg

defends his use of case studies in identifying political forms of reconciliation that correspond to theological teaching, and outlines a theological framework for interpreting political reconciliation.

The second section provides a detailed analysis of the operations of the TRC in South Africa, followed by the EK and 'Gauck Administration' in post-Berlin Wall Germany. Analysis of each case study proceeds via three sections. These concern: 1) background political conditions that shaped the treatment of guilt, analysed in relation to five key options for action; 2) the symbolic and ritual elements employed in dealing with guilt; and 3) a section 'tacking stock of systemic injustice'. The findings in this section are rich in detail but difficult to summarise. Each case study has a distinctive character, and arises out of particular conditions. These qualities are clarified in Wüstenberg's meticulously detailed and careful discussion. His analysis particularly highlights the absence of interpersonal dimensions in the German model, which leads to further reflections on the 'personal dimension' of reconciliation, and on notions of 'justice and reconciliation'.

Part of the difficulty in summarising these sections arises from what Wüstenberg terms 'regulative statements'. His analysis excavates these underlying assumptions which shaped and ordered political decision-making, but which varied in each case and were to some extent contradictory. Two axioms seem crucial, however. First, that 'reconciliation presumes the truth', and second, that 'reconciliation makes a new beginning possible' (194-196). The need to 'know what happened' is another common theme, though the underlying implications and assumptions guiding this ambition varied substantially.

The third section of the book, the theological commentary, aims to reconstruct the doctrine of reconciliation in politics in conversation with the preceding case studies. Here, the two axioms above provide some of the surest connections between theology and politics, at least in terms of thinking through options for political action. To Wüstenberg, actions of punishment and amnesty remain entirely 'penultimate' (in Bonhoeffer's terms), so that there is no correspondence between theological and political reconciliation in these terms. By contrast, he sees more potential in options that pursue truth, reparation and new beginnings. Yet even here, Wüstenberg argues that the content of political reconciliation is 'non-transferable' to theological reconciliation. While there may be 'signs of

transcendence of spiritual reconciliation’, the best that church and theology may realistically expect from political processes is a ‘fundamental openness’ (258).

In terms of the ‘process’ involved, Wüstenberg highlights stronger structural parallels between theological and political reconciliation. Thus, three elements – invitation to reconciliation, acceptance of that invitation, and the creation of new relationship – are evident in both. Crucially, however, Wüstenberg distinguishes between eschatology and teleology. Drawing again on Bonhoeffer he regards spiritual reconciliation not as the *telos*, but rather as an ‘interruption’ which enables something new to emerge. This comes through an always spiritual forgiveness, which ‘interrupts’ the guilt connection without removing it and remains distinct from political reconciliation. In this way, the political ‘process’ is distinguished from the spiritual ‘path’ to reconciliation.

Another aspect of the theological project involves evaluation from a symbolic perspective. Here Wüstenberg engages primarily with notions of remembrance, story-telling and solidarity, before an intriguing discussion of ritual. This finds correspondences between the political rituals evident in the TRC, for example, and the elements of liturgical worship. Wüstenberg notes that political rituals like this enable ‘a sense of the renewal and acceptance of the person’ (316). While they do not replace worship, they contain ‘implicit transcendent aspects.’ This is a rather weak connection, but Wüstenberg is more optimistic about the potential of ‘symbolic reproduction’ ordered around the metaphor of the ‘victim’. Through this he argues that the Christian idea of reconciliation can be reconstructed in the process of political forums, as a ‘symbolic reproduction of a process in which the Last Supper creates a real “space” of reconciliation for the Christian faith’ (329).

The conclusion is brief, and comprised of numerous bullet-points ordered around five key consequences for the life and witness of the Church: namely, that the Church is a place of thanksgiving; the Church has a political role; the Church reveals itself in its treatment of the victims; Christ is the hope of the Church; the Church provides a critical contrast to politics (331-34).

Overall, this is an impressive but difficult book. Wüstenberg’s engagement with Lutheran and Reformed traditions (and modern

Protestant theology in general) is wide-ranging and creative. His analysis is careful and precise, and brooks no easy answers. Yet this recognition of complexity tends somewhat against a transparent guiding thesis. Observations, reflections and analysis are astute, but the structure of the work and of argumentation is highly involved. Key assertions are summarised at each point, yet typically only provisionally. With so many dimensions at play this makes the trajectory of analysis challenging to follow. Nevertheless, it will be impossible to read this book without learning much, and without being provoked intellectually and theologically. Wüstenberg's book adds to our specific understanding of the South African and German experiences, and more broadly, to theological reflection on politics and political action.

*Geoffrey Troughton is Lecturer in Religious Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.*