

accorded a strong messianic identity in the Zohar, from which Luria, who considered him to be his soul-ancestor, derived similar distinction. The souls of his disciples were linked to those of Rashbi's disciples. Rashbi's soul, in particular, represented the recycled souls of earlier redeemers from Jewish history. The idea that underlies this process is the principle of metempsychosis or transmigration of souls (*gilgul*), which is not really part of mainstream Judaism but has been productively employed by mystical schools.

Lawrence Fine has written extensively on Lurianic thought and practice and with this eminently readable and well-researched book has produced a welcome addition to the scholarship on Kabbalism in general and Luria in particular. One of the additional merits of this study is its placement of many of the typically Lurianic traits into a wider sociological and intellectual context, namely that of the thought world of Gnosticism, Sufism, shamanism, as well as other branches of Jewish thought. A quite novel and welcome field to be explored that Fine introduces is the issue of "Lurianic Kabbalah and women" (15), dealing with the notion of charismatic women within the mystical community (120), and the role of women in the preparation of many of the rites that are not part of the liturgy itself (254). This book is a necessary source for anyone who wants to know something about Kabbalah and its important representatives other than the travesty of this fascinating side of Judaism that is espoused by today's popular culture.

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***The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth.* By David Bentley Hart. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. ISBN: 0-8028-2921-X. Pp. 448.**

As a contemporary work of Christian apologetics, David Bentley Hart's recent major book takes very seriously the challenge posed by what he sees today as Christianity's primary opponent: post-modernism. The author devotes just over 150 pages to the detailed articulation and refutation of post-modernism's many brands, all of which are, for Hart, in the end "ontologies of violence," but ultimately he finds its challenge untroubling for the Christian evangel, which he defines by (and even beyond) contrast as an ontology of peace. The primary impetus of the work, to that extent, is not strictly polemical, but rather evangelical, and is guided by the question (and not simply *a* question—for Christian rhetoric is, for Hart, prominently an aesthetics) concerning the theological defensibility of the beauty to which the evangelical tradition appeals. Hart articulates his guiding question the most completely as follows: "Can the Christian evangel of peace advance itself rhetorically, as beauty, in such a way as to make that peace real? Can the beauty of Christian rhetoric narrate itself in perfect consonance with the story of ontological peace that it

advances, or will it fall prey to contradiction..." (148–9)—which is to ask, will it fall prey to violence; will it become, itself, a violence?

Hart's concern here is, of course, the challenge of the post-modern critique of meta-narratives. After a short introduction in which he first poses his guiding question and undertakes to define the terms to be employed, he launches grippingly into a fairly lengthy section engaging with some rigor and many insights (although somewhat selectively) the writings of Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Lyotard, Foucault, and, of course, (their indebtedness to) Nietzsche. While granting that Modernity's commitment to the "thinking of totality" is rightly critiqued by them as a violence, he nevertheless questions any claim that all rhetoric (there being no "pure" speech, of course) is unavoidably violent in its expression, that any endless deferral is therefore required to avoid it, and furthermore argues (and this he recapitulates poignantly in a short final section on hermeneutics and the market) that the demand to cut short all narratives (an "ethical" exigency, lest any narrative expand to become "meta-" in tone) is itself merely a further violence, a "meta-meta-narrative," as he calls it, in its presumption of (or at least in its repressed nostalgia for) some perspective of neutrality. In fact, for Hart, all such "post-modernisms" share in common with the thinking of totality that they seek to deconstruct the simple fact of failing to allow themselves to be persuaded—to be opened to, to be opened by—the beauty of the Christian evangel of peace. This evangel he then proceeds to articulate (and even, as he admits, "rhapsodize") in the book's long middle section, a "*dogmatica minora*," in which the guiding question is explicitly addressed, and which writing itself is intended by Hart to be a gesture, an offering of, in being analogous to, the very ontology of peace of which it gives news.

Heavily indebted to Gregory of Nyssa (but also to Augustine, and appreciating Hans Urs von Balthasar along more Modern lines), Hart arranges his dogmatics under four main headings, beginning with the Trinity (and followed by Creation, Salvation, Eschaton). The Trinitarian *perichoresis*, the shared life as a pure self-donation, or pure "gift" to one another of the divine persons, is, as "aboriginal difference" (and not mere difference having derived from some Plotinian, original One), the foundation of the Christian ontology of peace. Such a life, for Hart, "overflows" as the creation—overflows, that is to say, as "gift"; and thus creation, being strictly "unnecessary," is freed into its difference in an analogous relationship with the Son. It is this interval of difference (or distance of analogy, the true "ontological difference") which, for Hart, opens the infinite, and does so precisely as beauty—that is, as intensively infinite form, as an elect rhetoric in its style as an excess (the Word being God's supreme rhetoric in which all the individual *logoi* of creation are called forth into being). Sin, moreover, is, for Hart, nothing more than the privation of this interval, and thus the privation of being as peace, and thus non-being; to that extent, salvation is thought as a simple recapitulation in Christ of the divine image in which humans are made—which in the Eschaton amounts to, following the Father's vindication of the Son (and not the crucifixion) in the Resurrection, a vindication as "very good" of all creation.

All in all, Hart's argument is brilliantly presented. My only hesitation concerns the failure of Hart's rhetoric to adequately address directly the question of "depth." For Hart, all depth is an aspiration of dialectical thought, and thus in the end a violence. The beauty of Christian form is, on the other hand, an intensity of "pure surface," with "depth" being merely that fold of the surface which has yet, in being called forth, to unfold. But the nature of this very being "called forth" or unfolding—a *phenomenology* of it, as a conversion *in the depths*, as "*interior intimo meo*"—is not given. He thus continually appeals to a whole series of oppositions—depth/surface, interior/exterior, self/other, univocity of being/difference, violence/peace—while nevertheless maintaining that the aesthetics of Christian truth is, ultimately, beyond such oppositions. One has only to develop the proper "optics," the proper "vision," through love analogous to the divine *perichoresis*, to see that it is so. So the task of the Christian rhetoric is thus to persuade, through its analogous style of excess (and one might easily point to Hart's own frequent "rhapsodies" on this score), of the truth of the Christian evangel. Granted, he is appreciative (in a small measure) of the contemporary work of Jean-Luc Marion, but a more extensive engagement than Hart affords with Marion's phenomenology of the icon (in its lack quite surprising for an Eastern Orthodox theologian) might have allowed him to flesh out his own rhetoric a little more rigorously with less dependence upon his often dizzying rhapsodic moods.

Beyond that, the book is masterfully written, seemingly inexhaustible in its wealth of topics all illustrative of the same theme, and perfectly at ease in both ancient and modern languages (although for those unversed especially in either Latin or Greek, frequent and long untranslated passages quoted in support of a particular point in Hart's argument will cause some vexation).

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***Essentials of Christian Theology.* Edited by William C. Placher.
Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2003. 0-6642-2395-8. Pp. x + 422.**

Introducing undergraduate and seminary students to the basic grammar of the Christian faith requires literature that is historically minded, clearly written and yet sensitive to the contemporary context. William C. Placher, LaFollette Distinguished Professor in the Humanities and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Wabash College (Crawfordsville, IN), has compiled such a text. Placher is no stranger to pedagogy in theology and religious studies, having won the American Academy of Religion's 2002 award for Excellence in Teaching, written an introduction to historical theology, and edited historical readers.

There are different types of books one can put into the hands of students beginning the theological quest; generally they are historical readers, one-volume systematic theologies or edited volumes comprised of contemporary