

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 complied 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

theologians. *Essentials of Christian Theology* is of the third genre. The volume is comprised mostly of original articles by distinguished North American theologians covering the basic loci of Christian doctrine. Each doctrine is given an historical introduction by Placher, giving the volume continuity, before the various scholars take up their interests. What makes this volume unique, and quite valuable, is that two different theologians are writing on the same doctrine, theologians generally on different sides of the theological spectrum. One may think of the articles as on a pendulum swinging between contextual theology and doctrinal orthodoxy—yet no author fits neatly on either side. The reader is thus left with the impression that theology is done as a constant dialogue between biblical-historical sources and contemporary contexts. Such an approach evinces that North American theologians are beginning to think beyond the conservative/liberal divide.

While students naturally will gravitate toward one side or the other, it will not be at the expense of neglecting the various theological perspectives. Consider just one of the pairings: noted process theologian John Cobb and trinitarian David Cunningham discuss the doctrine of God. Cobb, instead of expounding the philosophical binitarianism of Whitehead, takes up the NT narrative, reading it through process eyes, while Cunningham gives quite a lucid exposition of the richness found in trinitarian theology. The pairing of two feminist theologians on Creation and Providence is noteworthy as well. Sallie McFague first summarizes her ecological model of the world as God's body, while admitting its advantages and limitations. Katherine Tanner, reminiscent of Aquinas, then proposes a version of the God-world relation in which one does not need to choose between the transcendence and immanence of God. She sophisticatedly argues that God and creation operate in different yet complimentary modes of action and causality. Another highlight is Ellen T. Charry's explication of the Christian life, which is a brilliant and practical commentary on 1 Corinthians.

The other stimulating pairings include: Stanley Grenz and Noel Erskine on Revelation and Authority; Serene Jones and Clark Williamson on Anthropology and Sin; Robert Jenson and Leanne Van Dyk on Christology; Hughes Oliphant Old and Letty Russell on the Church; Paul Knitter and J. A. DiNoia on Religious Pluralism; and Richard Mouw and Ted Peters on Eschatology. Conspicuously absent is any reflection on the Holy Spirit, which is usually coupled with the Church. This is unfortunate since there are plenty of North American theologians qualified to write on pneumatology.

This text will no doubt become a standard textbook for courses introducing Christian theology, but will also be useful for surveying contemporary theology. Those teaching in a denominational college or seminary will want to supplement this text with works focused on their particular traditions. It would also be helpful to couple this book with historical reading, such as Placher's own volumes or Alister McGrath's reader; there is no substitute for reading classics. But as this collection illustrates, we may have some classics unfolding in our midst.

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