

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 63: 3

July 1999

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## Book Reviews

**AMERICAN ORIGINALS: HOMEMADE VARIETIES OF CHRISTIANITY.** By Paul K. Conkin, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xv + 336 pages.

“An Arminian position is difficult to reconcile with omnipotence” (319), writes Paul Conkin, Distinguished Professor of History at Vanderbilt University. Perhaps Conkin’s language is a bit too soft—“irreconcilable” would certainly do—yet his basic point is a good one: American religion generally, and unique American religious developments specifically, have, in effect, changed the way Americans think about God. The uniquely American conception about religion makes God essentially passive—man is the critical actor in the various schemes here presented. That certainly compromises any classical, orthodox understanding of God’s omnipotence.

Conkin identifies six categories of religious expression in American Christianity: 1) restoration; 2) humanistic; 3) apocalyptic; 4) Mormon; 5) spiritual; and 6) ecstatic. Under these rubrics appear what Conkin calls “homegrown varieties” of Christianity: Disciples of Christ and the Church of Christ (*not* The United Church of Christ); Unitarians and Universalists; Seventh-Day Adventist and Jehovah’s Witnesses; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; Christian Science and Unity; Holiness and Pentecostal denominations. He examines the European backgrounds, early expressions, critical players, theological maturation, development of practice, and contemporary expressions and demographics of the above sects.

The Lutheran reader might be troubled with Conkin’s description of the groups as “Christians.” He does so purposefully, noting that each of these movements originated within the broader boundaries of Protestant Christianity. Conkin, in fact, is quick to point out the sometimes “conservative” early character of some of these groups, regardless of their later expressions. A case in point are the Universalists. Conkin argues that originally Universalists were Bible-believing Christians whose source of authority was the inspired word of God. Their theological concern stemmed from their conviction that Calvinists had misread the Scriptures in formulating the notion of a limited atonement. The early Universalists’ common sense reading of the Bible led them to affirm that Christ had in fact died for all, and that, therefore, all would be saved. Certainly there would be punishment for sin, but that punishment was meted out

either in this life or in a preparatory age previous to the final advent of Christ. Thus, says Conkin, what today passes for Universalism has little in common with its roots.

It is perhaps this point that Conkin fails efficiently to address. Put another way, what is it in American Christianity that allows its churches to depart so radically from their historic roots, theology, and practice (a question many in the LCMS ask about their own body)? One component of that answer is found in the ways that Americans glibly ignore their history and divest it of any formative significance. History/tradition is easily ignored/cast aside when it does not meet the pragmatic demands of the present. If nothing else, these stories serve to warn and advise us. In the ahistorical American context, the increasingly un- and even anti-Christian theological development over time in the sects here examined should encourage confessional Lutheranism to maintain its unique historical and theological narrative.

In that sense *American Originals* is a very helpful and informative volume. Though typographical errors dot a number of pages, and Conkin's assessments are at times unguarded ("[Alexander] Campbell's ambiguous doctrine of baptismal remission came closest to Luther," page 30), this is a very helpful volume for understanding the history, doctrine, and practice of several significant sects, cults, and heresies. Finally, Conkin adds a Reading Guide, which encourages further study and reflection on the part of his readers.

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

**INHERITING PARADISE: MEDITATIONS ON GARDENING.**  
**By Vigen Guroian. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans**  
**Publishing Company, 1999. 95 Pages. Paper. \$9.00.**

"Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise Him in the heights! Praise Him, all His angels; praise Him, all His hosts! Praise Him, sun and moon; praise Him, all you stars of light! Praise Him, you heavens of heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for He commanded and they were created" (Psalm 148:1-5). In Vigen Guroian, creation has found a golden mouth and a most fluid tongue to hymn God's glory. His thin offering, *Inherit Paradise: Meditations on Gardening*, is thick with theological and spiritual insight. Here truth is no dogmatic theory

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that hangs like haze above the earth, unbreathable for most men. Rather, truth flows from these pages with a beauty, freshness, and earthiness that resonate with man's inward being.

Vigen Guroian is a theologian of the Armenian Orthodox tradition. He teaches theology and ethics at Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland. However, surpassing his theological interests is Mr. Guroian's love of gardening. Indeed, the reader of his meditations will quickly discover that his theology is a function and extension of his horticultural interests. The garden is his constant companion and teacher. In every season, the living and dying yard manifests the will of God. Today, theologians often limit creation to the realm of "natural" theology. This situation has left a chasm between the natural and the supernatural, between creation and scripture, and between church and world. No such chasm exists in the mind of Vigen Guroian. For him, heaven and earth are full of God's glory. The earth is one substance with humanity, and humanity is consubstantial with the Only-begotten Son. In this living communion, the dust of the earth and the flesh of man share a common origin and a common destiny in the will of the Father. Thus, for Mr. Guroian, gardening is not merely a theological metaphor, but a sacramental revelation of God's will to give life. What God does in the earth through the gardener, He does in the flesh of man through Jesus Christ. The reader will read an abundant harvest from these short but fruitful meditations.

Rev. James G. Bushur  
Trinity Lutheran Church  
Goodland, Indiana