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Book Reviews

Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium. By Bart D. Ehrman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Cloth. 274 pages. \$25.00.

Bart D. Ehrman, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, takes advantage of the millennium change to revive the theme that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet who expected to be delivered by the "Son of Man." As the theory goes, Jesus dies hopelessly with no one to aid Him. Later, an anonymous but influential early church community erroneously concluded that Jesus was Himself the "Son of Man." Without critically analyzing their sources, the Evangelists took this misidentification over into the Gospels. Early Christian communities, and not Jesus, are also held responsible for most Christian doctrines.

There is nothing new offered here, notwithstanding a very entertaining writing style. Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet has been around since the quest for the historical Jesus began in the eighteenth century and was popularized a century ago by Albert Schweitzer. To arrive at his conclusion Ehrman applies his principle of "the criterion of dissimilarity" (85-101) to the Gospel data. In reviewing raw historical data, the historian should have at his disposal numerous, independent, noncontradictory, internally coherent, nonbiased sources which are close to the event. This avoids contamination by legend or hearsay. According to these criteria most Gospel data prove unusable for Ehrman. An example of applying his principles are the origins of Jesus. Matthew and Luke have vested interests in presenting his virgin birth and hence these accounts are discredited. Mark knows nothing of the birth of Jesus and Paul simply says that He was born of a woman. John speaks of Joseph as Jesus' father (96). Since the data is contradictory, prejudiced and far removed from the event, nothing is known "about the sex lives of Jesus' parents before he was born" (97). That is pretty straightforward.

Dismissed as biased and hence questionable is any coherence between what the church preached about Jesus and what is attributed to Him. All that is left is a politically radical Jesus, which is not a very radical idea. Ehrman's "criterion of dissimilarity" is not unlike Bultmann's principle of demythologizing: church testimony about Jesus is discounted as prejudicial and hence not historically trustworthy. His principles, like those of other historical investigators of the Gospels, often give off the aroma of a rarely challenged immunity. By assuming a late date for the New Testament, its writings are disqualified as valid witnesses. Since the Gospels come from Q and Mark, they cannot be counted as independent witnesses anyway. Then by showing alleged differences in the Gospels about the origins of Jesus, Ehrman completely ignores either the purpose of the individual Evangelist or the setting where the words are found. Endorsers of Ehrman's approach credit him with a consistent application

of his principles; however, it seems that he looked for principles that would lead him to his conclusion. Of course there are solutions to the conclusions his method presents. Reference to Jesus as Joseph's son is found in the mouth of unbelievers, at least according to John's Gospel. Now if John was so biased in favor of Jesus, why didn't he exclude it? What interest did Luke have in showing that Jesus was born of a virgin and if he did have an interest in it, why does this disqualify his being a valid historical source? If "the criterion of dissimilarity" were to be applied to all other aspects of history, we would have to disqualify nearly all of the materials out of which historians construct their histories. Anything Stalin's comrades or later Communists wrote about him would have to be dismissed as biased. However, by using catchy paragraph headings like "If the Shoe Fits . . . The Criterion of Contextual Credibility," he takes his readers into the esoteric realm of New Testament criticism, whose vocabulary is often a barrier to the uninitiated. For traditionalists his conclusions are outrageous, but for the New Testament world of scholars these are nothing all that new. Neither is his method.

David P. Scaer

Der güldene Griff: Kontoverse um den „Gülden Griff“ vom judicio im Menschen. By Valentin Weigel. Herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Horst Pfefferl. Stugart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-holzboog, 1997. LXIII + 169 pages. Cloth.

Frommann-holzboog has been collecting and publishing the works of a little known figure among American Lutherans, Valentin Weigel. Horst Pfefferl has edited *Der güldene Griff*, first published in 1578. Pfefferl divides the volume into three sections, a detailed introduction, the text of *Der güldene Griff* itself, and several indices. This text, along with the other works of Weigel published by Frommann-holzboog, have opened the door to understanding Valentin Weigel.

Valentin Weigel (1533-1588) was born at Naundorf, Saxony in 1533. After studying at Leipzig and Wittenberg, he assumed the pastoral office at Zschopau in 1567. At the onset of his ministry he was apparently part of the orthodox camp. Over time, however, his posthumously published writings indicate that he moved from orthodoxy to a proto-pietistic form of mysticism. Drawing on such sources as Johannes Tauler, the "German Theology," Sebastian Franck, Paracelsus (Theophrastus), and even, perhaps, Thomas Müntzer, he moved from a theology based on the word of God and reflected in the Lutheran Confessions to a radical neo-platonism that maintained that man's soul possessed a "divine spark." If cultivated, this divine spark allowed for the soul's immediate communication with God. This move was obviously unorthodox. The

means of grace, the institutional church, the office of the ministry all are peripheral, in fact, unnecessary for the soul that has sufficiently progressed in its development. What is only now beginning to emerge is the evidence of Weigel's impact on the development of Lutheran Pietism in the century following his death. Some time ago James Haney provocatively argued that Johann Arndt (1555-1621), a Lutheran pastor and theologian, incorporated elements of eastern mysticism into his theological program, which in turn influenced Lutheran Pietism through the likes of those whom Arndt influenced, most notably Philip Jakob Spener (1635-1705). The volume at hand raises the question the question of the role of Weigel may have played in influencing the formation of Pietism, as many of its themes appear in incipient form in Weigel.

Obviously, most pastors, or even professors for that matter, will not need this volume in their personal libraries. However, the publication of this particular volume in the larger corpus of the collected works of Weigel provides a significant resource for scholars who seek to discern the roots of Pietism and the sources of its theological assumptions. In this respect, the publication of Weigel's works is a commendable endeavor that may serve confessional Lutherans in unveiling the powerful impact that theologians like Weigel and Arndt have had even on the orthodox Lutheran position via Pietism. Horst Pfefferl and Frommann-holzboog publishers have done their part. Now the literature waits for able interpreters.

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic. By John H. Berthrong. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999.

This book studies how notions of religious identity, particularly Christian identity, have changed in America. Berthrong argues that since the 1960's many Americans have blurred the lines separating different religions by adapting and blending beliefs and practices from different religions into Christianity. His chief example of this is the widespread use of Eastern meditation techniques within some Christian circles. Reasons for this blurring include increased non-Christian immigration to the United States, which has resulted in more religious options for seekers as well as a general cultural trend toward "spirituality," but not Christianity. Berthrong, an avowed and unapologetic liberal, sees this as a positive indication that Christianity can finally throw off its exclusivist claims to the truth and come to respect other religions as valid ways of seeking out the "divine reality." Once this has been done, people of all faiths will be able to unite to fight the only true evil in the world – the growing planet wide ecological crisis. When all is said and done this is Berthrong's only real concern. His ecological agenda is at the background

of every chapter of the book whether it is relevant to the topic or not. The book however, is not without its uses. It would make an excellent introduction to the post-modern mind set and would help future pastors prepare for the kinds of presuppositions they may encounter as they talk to people with little or no background in the church. In the end when it comes to Berthrong's *Divine Deli*, you can look at the menu, but eating will result in food poisoning.

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Atlas of American Religion: The Denominational Era, 1776-1990. By William M. Newman and Peter L. Halverson. Walnut Creek, California: Altamira Press, 2000. 176 pages. \$49.95 cloth.

Since the publication of Edwin Scott Gaustad's revised *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976), there has not been a successful attempt at compiling and publishing a comprehensive atlas of American religion—that is, until now. William Newman, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, and Peter Halverson, Professor of Geography, both at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, have helped bring American religious demographics up-to-date in a useable form. More than a collection of data, however, this atlas also has a prominent theme. The authors seek to allow the maps to act narratively—they intend for the maps to tell a story leading up to a very specific point, namely, “that the resulting pattern of organized religions in the United States at the dawn of the twenty-first century is a unique happening” (15). The specific character of that “unique happening” emerges in the five chapters of the book, which articulate a fivefold typology: national denominations, multiregional denominations, classic sects, multiregional sects, and national sects. The result is a very informative and useful volume, both as a reference volume and as an introductory narrative, which should find its way into the library of every serious American religious historian. Beyond that, however, it has an immensely practical value and applicability for the parish pastor, for it can help him understand the denominational development of his particular geographic setting; something no pastor should undervalue as he engages in the ministry.

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.