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Review: The Unreal God of Modern Theology

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ing as a dramatic revival following a period of universal spiritual dryness, Pointer argues for more gradualism in spiritual intensity between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular Pointer examines numerous church records from the revolutionary era. He convincingly shows that, in spite of the tremendous pressures that the war brought, many of the churches not only survived but grew—sometimes remarkably. In addition the war had the significant effect of strengthening the ecumenical tendencies already found among evangelicals and liberals.

One of Pointer's strongest achievements is his challenge to the traditional understanding of revivals, especially the second Great Awakening. He argues that too many historians have focused on the camp meetings or the Finney revivals of the nineteenth century and thus have assumed that revivals must be preceded by times of great spiritual dryness. Rather, Pointer argues, a better understanding of a revival is an intensifying of religious commitment often in settings where there was already considerable spiritual interest. He argues that this understanding of a revival as an unplanned visitation of spiritual renewal from God fits in much better with eighteenth-century theological self-understanding than the nineteenth-century model of revivalism. Pointer gives considerable evidence of such intensification of religious activity in the 1790s in many already-growing New York churches.

Pointer's book is important for our understanding of what he argues was to become the paradigm for American church life. While he recognizes that eighteenth-century New Yorkers would most likely not have been pleased with contemporary developments they did set the pattern for the dominant model of church life in nineteenth-century America.

A well-written book based on extensive use of contemporary accounts, Pointer's work expands our knowledge of colonial and Revolutionary religious life in a number of ways. The only problematic part of the volume is its attempt to apply a quantitative approach to the issue of the relationship of the number of church participants to the total population. The way the statistics are used seems somewhat arbitrary and confused, and the rationale for their usage is vague and sketchy. This flaw, however, should not detract from the value of the book. Its conclusions are based on solid research and throw light on numerous aspects of eighteenth-century religious life in New York.

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The Unreal God of Modern Theology: Bultmann, Barth and the Theology of Atheism: A Call to Recovering the Truth of God's Reality. By Klaus Bockmuehl. Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1988, 183 pp., n.p.

This new analysis of contemporary theology by Bockmuehl is no mere reporting of recent trends but rather an incisive analysis, critique and diagnosis of the present situation and its effect on the faith of the Church. His book is a timely translation by G. Bromiley that touches the roots of the present dilemma, if not warfare, of Christianity in the post-enlightenment period. While Bockmuehl makes it clear early on that the present problem of God's "unreality," the sense of the divine "absence" in modern life and thought, goes back at least to Kant (and perhaps beyond to Descartes's "cleavage of reality," p. 52), his focus is primarily upon two influential and formative theological giants of the twentieth century—R. Bultmann and K. Barth—and through them to the fruit of their labors, Christian atheism.

The philosophical background of the modern perception of the unreality or absence of God is a significant and ever-present connection made throughout western culture. The false Kantian dualistic presupposition, cosmologically and epistemologically, forms the distorting, deadly basis of Bultmann's and (the early) Barth's theological perspective.

Bockmuehl raises some eyebrows (my own included) by lumping Bultmann, Tillich and Barth together as theological fathers of the late-twentieth-century "loss" of God in theology, in ethics, in society, in politics, in life. For Bultmann the modern view of man and man's existential "self-understanding" are set against the Biblical view of God's real presence, not just "in the heart" but in everyday reality. Bultmann's chasm between "this" world and "that" world (which led to his program of demythologization and the emphasis on man's self-understanding) leads both to the view of God as deistically relegated to "that" world and to ethics as detached from "faith" (authenticity). Herein Bultmann is shown for all his actual, practical atheism.

Barth (the early and therefore pre-Anselm and pre-*Church Dogmatics* Barth) is also guilty of creating the perspectival and theological climate of the "unreality of God." Most of Bockmuehl's criticism of Barth (though coupled with much admiration) ties to his *Romans* commentary (wherein I have long noted a hermeneutic that would later be linked to Bultmann) and to his essays to about 1925 (especially from *The Word of God and Word of Man*). Yet he significantly points to the "unreality of God" for Barth even through much of the *Dogmatics*, a fact that can be variously recognized, for example, in the difference in "times." Whereas Bultmann emphasizes the immanent human self-understanding as a result of God's definitional "other"-worldly absence from "this" world, Barth focuses on the transcendent, utterly other majesty of God, whose disclosive "relatedness" to humanity is "tangential." The result is the same. Bockmuehl points out how God's unrelatedness to "this" world (and hence his "unreality") remains a factor in Barth until late in the *Dogmatics*. Fortunately Bockmuehl gives time to Barth's own self-criticism and reorientation as a result of his ongoing interaction with Scripture.

Even for recent theologians and theological movements that would eschew any direct claim to Barth or to Bultmann, their implantation of the absolute wall of separation between "this" and "that" world has been incorporated and moved on to the logical ends, the ends that Feuerbach and Marx advocated in the nineteenth century—i.e. atheism. Bockmuehl's long study of Marxist thought is used well to show how the avowed enemies of Christianity can be some of its best backhanded prophets. H. Braun and D. Solle are two of the theologians Bockmuehl uses as examples of those who have brought theological dualism to its inevitable God-less conclusion.

Bockmuehl's diagnostic and restorative final chapter is very important. It reinstitutes Biblical thinking about God and God's genuine active presence "with us." In this chapter Bockmuehl opens the reader's eyes to God's kingdom as not "by and by," or "beyond," or "out there," or "back there," but here and now.

I heartily recommend this work for all those interested in and concerned with contemporary theology and its effects, directions and consequences for faith in the late twentieth century. Bockmuehl's knowledge of modern philosophical and theological trends is excellent, as is his studied criticism of Marxism. Bockmuehl brings out pivotal points, especially pertaining to Bultmann, that most do not appreciate. Bockmuehl's view of Barth was startling at first, but for the most part it is accurately and effectively done. His ability to tie the entire false perspective together along its multifarious lines is to be commended.

Yet I must make some criticisms. Through much of his analysis of Barth, Bockmuehl makes little of the developmental stages in Barth's thinking, stages that resulted from Barth's continued study of Scripture. It may be that this was not Bockmuehl's point—i.e. not a study of Barth as such but of Barth's influence. Nevertheless I found the belated distinctions problematic. There are a number of passages that, no matter how they were reread, seemed to make little sense. These were sometimes coupled with odd illustrations that proved to be of little help. There seemed to be an equation of knowing the problem and its cure with an automatic change in the reality of the situation. But Bockmuehl really only opens the door to the answers to the modern dilemma. Coupled with T. Torrance's reconstructive efforts to overthrow theological dualism, there is much in this book to commend. But Bockmuehl's last chapter seems sometimes shallow, even falling occasionally into the dilemma it seeks to overthrow. Having said that, however, I recommend the book.

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The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church. By Thomas F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1988, 345 pp., n.p.

Classic expressions of the history of doctrine have usually followed the broad sweep of the development of thought and theology, breaking up the course of discussion only to give attention to this or that important segment. This has been true of recent excellent works as well (e.g. Kelly, Pelikan). By comparison, however, one old and effective way of doing theology is to set forth one's exposition within the structure of an ancient creed of the Church, particularly the Apostles' Creed (Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline* is one recent expression), and yet this is rarely done today. In the volume under review, Torrance has brought together the doing of theology and the history of doctrine within the strict confessional guidelines of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the swirling torrent of controversy surrounding it in the third and fourth centuries.

Torrance's purpose within the confines of this highly significant and formative historico-theological context is above all to grasp hold of and to bring forth one central issue, one preeminent theological concern: the coherent nature of God's interactive relatedness to and with and in the space-time world. This relatedness arises within the Godhead, within the intratrinitarian relations, and is expressed most fully in the movement from God to man, in the "Word made flesh" who "dwelt among us," whose glory we have beheld. Of absolute importance to this purpose in Torrance is the critical term *homoousion* and its many profound theological implications. In his helpful foreword Torrance says that he wants to make an "integrated presentation" of the "coherent character of Nicene theology" and to show the "inner theological connections which give coherent structure to classical theology," thereby overcoming the distorting "influence of dualistic ways of thought derived from Hellenism." This rejection of dualism means that mankind can have genuine access to the Father (that is, to the knowledge of God as he is in himself) because "his incarnate reality has been made the supreme Principle of all God's ways and works within the order of creation and redemption alike, and the controlling Principle of all our understanding of them" (pp. 1-3). This focus or thesis is drawn out and amplified throughout the work.



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