

6-1-2001

Review of The Cultic Origins of Christianity: The Dynamics of Religious Development, by W. W. Meissner

C. Kevin Gillespie S.J.

Saint Joseph's University, president@sju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.sju.edu/pres_ofc



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Citation

Gillespie, C. Kevin. Review of The Cultic Origins of Christianity: The Dynamics of Religious Development, by W. W. Meissner. *Theological Studies* 62.2 (Jun. 2001): 411-413. Print.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Administration at Scholarship@SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Office of the President by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@SJU. For more information, please contact kmudrick@sju.edu.

or echoes the congregation's responses in the liturgical assembly" (33). Her book could have benefited from some "hands on" insights into how this communication is sustained and nurtured in the course of implementing feminist liturgy: How does one keep a diverse community, such as the one described in the quote above, vibrant and alive? How can splits and factions in congregations be avoided?

Chapter 2, "The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics: A Survey of Some Approaches," is devoted to the proposals of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Sandra Schneiders, which S. plumbs for their liturgical ramifications. She examines through a liturgical lens the four parts to Schüssler Fiorenza's model of feminist interpretation: a hermeneutics of suspicion, of proclamation, of remembrance, and of creative actualization. For S., the implications of this model for the use of Scripture in liturgy are wide-ranging. The Bible will continue to be read and honored in worship, but its proclamation will be amplified and nuanced with feminist reconstructions; the public reading of Scripture will probably not be announced as "the word of the Lord" except where it can be demonstrated as liberating to women.

Some of S.'s suggestions for divesting the Bible of its "quasi-magical status," however, do not seem consistent with her new lectionary project outlined in chapter 3, "Bible Readings and the Lectionary in Worship." Here, S. emphasizes that a lectionary must provide ample Scripture for the worshipping community and confront worshipers with the scope and diversity of biblical material. In the previous chapter, however, as well as here, S. argues for a tighter control of texts for the lectionary. She wants to omit the epistle reading during the Sundays of Advent on the grounds that this "traditional" Advent-related material tends to be highly apocalyptic; she wants to downplay the reversal-oriented, waiting mode. She also objects to the important place of the Psalter in liturgy—she finds it highly androcentric, with its God-talk weighted toward kingship and other images of transcendent power. Again, this dismissal of a large portion of biblical material seems to contradict S.'s belief that ample and diverse Scripture should be provided for the worshipping community.

The book, although well written, well researched, and well documented, has a "preaching to the choir" feel to it. This could have been avoided had S. addressed the need for liturgical reform along feminist lines while taking account of the impact of such reform on the broader worshipping community.

Marquette University, Milwaukee

DEIRDRE DEMPSEY

THE CULTIC ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY: THE DYNAMICS OF RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT. By W. W. Meissner. Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000. Pp. xxxiv + 261. \$27.95.

In recent years theological and psychological literatures have been steadily accumulating information on the nature of cults. While archeological findings and anthropological understandings have enriched theological in-

vestigations of ancient cults, psychological research has often focused upon examining the present-day rise of cults that have accompanied the end of one and the beginning of another millennium. At the start of a new millennium, then, how fortunate it is that Meissner, a Jesuit psychoanalyst, offers an analysis of the dynamics of cults and then explores how such dynamics influenced early Christian movements.

Ever since publishing in 1961 a comprehensive annotated bibliography of psychology and religion, M. has provided a wealth of works that demonstrate the relevance of psychology for theology. His latest book builds upon earlier examinations of cults, most especially *Thy Kingdom Come* (1995), a work on the dynamics of millenarianism. In the present work M., as in many of his other writings, seeks to make applicable the Thomistic axiom that "grace builds on nature." His present study suggests that the axiom may be applicable to groups.

Throughout the five sections and 14 chapters of the book, M. offers refined considerations of the seemingly disparate early Christian communities. He finds that some of these communities exhibited cult-like tendencies, manifested in the formation of subgroups and even opposing factions. He considers these behaviors as having emerged from psychodynamic processes. Chief among such dynamics are paranoid processes, which, he cautiously suggests, runs the spectrum from normal to pathological. He emphasizes his intention not to focus on the pathology of paranoia, but to speak to the pervasive psychodynamics of introjections, projections, and paranoid construction. While advising against psychological reductionism, M. does want his readers to come to a greater appreciation of the intrapsychic and interpersonal forces involved in the establishment and survival of the early Church.

In introducing the reader to the mechanisms of the paranoid process, M. offers an overview of Freud's classic case of Judge Paul Daniel Schreber. Theological readers may not be well acquainted with the psychoanalytic constructs discussed, but they will be familiar with the biblical scholarship from which M. draws in his analysis of early Christianity. He refers to the writings of a host of biblical scholars, among them Fitzmyer, Harrington, Horsley, Meeks, and Theissen. Such authors assist M. in examining the influence that Gnosticism had on pre-Christian, Jewish, and Christian cults. At the same time, in addition to Freud, M. refers to such psychoanalytic theorists as Kernberg, Klein, Kohut, and Volkan.

M.'s psychotheological task is daunting, as it requires him to maneuver between the Scylla of theological technicalities and the Charybdis of psychoanalytic formulations. Some passages, however, seem verbose and tend to lead the reader's attention astray. Despite this qualification, a careful reading rewards, as M.'s presentation helps one more clearly to recognize the prodigious tasks that faced the early Christian movements who found themselves marginalized from both the structures of imperial Rome and the systems of a threatened Judaism. Their outcast status carried with it occasional hostilities so that, when faced with persecutions and prejudices, early believers in Christ felt collectively victimized.

M.'s analysis makes an important contribution in that he leads the reader toward a keener knowledge of the possible conscious and unconscious motivations that propelled the early Christians and the defense mechanisms that protected them. His study invites one to wonder, how did these early believers in Christ survive socially as individuals and as groups? What were the defense mechanisms that enabled them to cope with the oppressions? In entertaining such questions the reader is invited to imagine more readily the challenges and consequences of being a member of the early Christian movements.

M. admits that, given the limited data, he can speak only generically about the discontent and frustration experienced within and among the early Christian movements. He nevertheless argues that they were forced to contend with social pressures that promoted a highly sectarian character that in turn resulted in such cultic characteristics as strong group adherence, enforced ideology, a dependence upon charismatic leaders, reactive and self-deceptive narcissism, and tendencies toward paranoid processes. At the same time, the values offered by the Christian groups allowed individuals to assimilate values and develop a profound sense of belonging, whereby they had a sense of participating in something larger than themselves.

In sum, the unique approach which M. brings to this study represents an authoritative contribution to both theological and psychological literatures of the ancient as well as the contemporary world.

Loyola College, Maryland

C. KEVIN GILLESPIE, S.J.

RELIGION AND SCIENTIFIC NATURALISM: OVERCOMING THE CONFLICTS. By David Ray Griffin. Albany: State University, 2000. Pp. xvii + 345. \$29.95.

Is it really possible to achieve harmony between science and religion? Yes, answers Griffin, but to do so requires uniting scientists and religious people in a philosophical worldview that supports both a scientific naturalism and a robust theism. Scientists must adopt a "minimal" scientific naturalism that allows for no supernatural divine interference with the laws of cause and effect in the universe, but withholds incorporation of the philosophical presuppositions of materialism, sensationism (no perception except sensory perception), and atheism. Religions must give up supernaturalism. But they need a robust theism to survive, one that supports the traditional idea of God as personal, purposive, providential creator, supreme in power, perfect in goodness, and experienced by human beings. This God must also be guarantor of the meaningfulness of life, provider of hope for the ultimate overcoming of evil, the source of moral norms and religious experiences, and alone worthy of worship. Such a naturalistic theism is available, based upon the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne; although some of these divine attributes require reinterpretation, based principally upon an understanding of divine power as persuasive.