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

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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 investigations of ancient cults, psychological research has often focused on 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. The verbosity of some passages is distracting, but

a careful reading rewards. M.'s presentation helps one more clearly recognize the prodigious tasks that faced the early Christian movements that 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 these early believers in Christ survived socially as individuals and as groups, and what their defense mechanisms were 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 these values and develop a profound sense of belonging, whereby new adherents had a sense of participating in something larger than themselves.

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

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LA RÉSURRECTION ET L'EXALTATION DU CHRIST DANS LA LITTÉRATURE DE L'ÈRE PATRISTIQUE. By Raymond Winling. Théologies. Paris: Cerf, 2000. Pp. 511. Fr. 195.

Winling's overall view of the early Church's doctrine on Christ's Resurrection convincingly shows that explicit thinking about this teaching occupied a central and fundamental place in the thinking of the early Church in a variety of areas. This book begins to palliate the dearth of major systematic treatments of the early Church's thinking about the Resurrection and its relationship to other doctrines. W. proves that the sometimes bumpy historical development of the liturgical week and year and of the creeds can be understood only by recognizing that explicit reflection on Christ's Res-