



Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner, eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*

Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism by Delwin Brown, ; Sheila Greeve Davaney, ; Kathryn Tanner,

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Book Reviews

sources—a task that would contribute to the history of Jewish and Christian efforts to conceive together the God of the prophets and the God of Job's whirlwind.

AMY CARR, *Western Illinois University*.

BROWN, DELWIN; DAVANEY, SHEILA GREEVE; and TANNER, KATHRYN, eds.
Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xiii+202 pp. \$18.95 (cloth).

Based on a 1997 conference at the University of Chicago, this book explores the recent turn to cultural analysis as theology's conversation partner. Participants include those who otherwise sit on different sides of conventional post-liberal, revisionist, liberation, and pragmatist fences. The shift from exegetical, philosophical, and hermeneutical to social, cultural, and political analysis is the claimed commonality, although authors differ widely in how they define and use cultural theory. The editors use one general contrast to sort the volume into two sections of five and six chapters, respectively, with authors in part 1 interested in conceptual issues surrounding this development and authors in part 2 in exploring theology as a form of cultural analysis within particular communities.

As someone who studied in an interdisciplinary field of religion and culture at the University of Chicago—an institution Sheila Greeve Davaney recognizes as uniquely interested in sociohistorical aspects of religion long before now—I asked myself, "What is so new about seeing religion as a cultural process?" That constructive theology might emerge out of concrete forms of religious life, among other claims, would not strike colleagues in religion and culture (e.g., sociology of religion, psychology of religion, religion and psychology, practical theology, etc.) as particularly innovative. Although I found the assumption that the academy should applaud the turn by systematic theologians to everyday people and ordinary practices a bit pretentious and even uninformed about developments in my own field, I did find some good answers to my original question.

Davaney's chapter serves as an excellent introduction, providing definitional clarity sometimes missing from other chapters. Theologians join recent cultural theorists in contesting holistic renderings of culture as a static fund of knowledge guarded by intellectual elites. Instead culture refers to the invention, negotiation, and renegotiation of dynamic, contentious material practices and ways of life. Mary McClintock Fulkerson's congregational study nicely illustrates what this looks like in a small Methodist church. One simply cannot distinguish "something called Christian culture," with a "fixed impermeable" boundary, from the non-Christian cultures that infiltrate and inform it. Christian culture is, rather, an "emergent performance" better understood, using Pierre Bourdieu, as an embodied habitus with a fragmented hybrid of values, convictions, and assumptions (pp. 146–47). Three other essays in the book's second section by Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Mark Taylor, Anthony Pinn, and Dwight Hopkins demonstrate how shifting theories of culture open up space for fresh understandings of religion's formative role. Liberating stories of Latina women, ancient Mayan and Aztec traditions, forgotten African-American arti-

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facts, and practices of slave religion all challenge reified assumptions about theology and culture.

Beyond the turn to new cultural theories and to religion as part of culture, a third move, explored more explicitly in the first section, is the idea of theology itself as a cultural practice. Theology takes its place alongside other fields as a dimension of academic culture and resists the conventional modern bifurcation that condemns it as more value-laden than religious studies or other disciplines. The chapters in this section—Linell Cady’s overview of theology’s release from an ahistorical, acontextual sequestering, Delwin Brown’s portrait of theology as a new kind of ethnography, Rebecca Chopp’s insights into testimony, and Victor Anderson’s debunking of social critics who unimaginatively understand secularization as bracketing rather than including theology—all establish in different ways theology’s place in the academy. If other aspects of religion deserve study, as Davaney says, so also do a religious tradition’s beliefs, including its normative, constructive contributions to public debate.

This book does not suffer a common plight of many edited collections (lack of coherence or fluctuation in quality). But greater effort by each contributor to explain his or her operative view of cultural analysis would have enhanced its contribution. When did each person first encounter the term “cultural analysis” in a theological context, as Serene Jones tells readers, and why has it become so important? Some, like Jones, assume “cultural theory” as a kind of cohesive field with clear texts and spokespersons, and others, like Isasi-Díaz, do not bother to make much mention of it at all. Even though Davaney claims that examination of social location has become a commonplace aspect of cultural analysis, only Jones traces her “cultural travel log.” Just as her account goes a long way in clarifying why she finds cultural theory a positive addition, so also might such accountability have enhanced other essays. In general, however, the book leaves one with hope, as Cady suggests, that the rise of cultural studies will serve as an antidote to theology’s demise.

BONNIE J. MILLER-MCLEMORE, *Vanderbilt University*.

PLACHER, WILLIAM C. *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. x+230 pp. \$19.95 (paper).

William Placher presents us with a relatively compact, highly readable christology that begins with the question, “How can we find out who Jesus really was and is?” (p. 2). The book is structured around four episodes in the event of Jesus Christ: incarnation, ministry, cross, and resurrection. Further, after an exploration of incarnation, each succeeding “episode” is explored through three “contexts”: Israel, the church, and our own lives. Under the context of Israel, this allows Placher to examine Jesus as prophet, priest, and monarch. In the context of the church, he discusses preaching, the Lord’s Supper, and baptism; and in the context of our lives, he treats the ethical issues of homosexuality, prisons, and war. Placher is clear that the central image in christology is the image of Jesus as savior, and thus the question of who Jesus was and is is inextricably tied up with what he does, his saving work.

The book proceeds through its themes and contexts in twenty-five relatively