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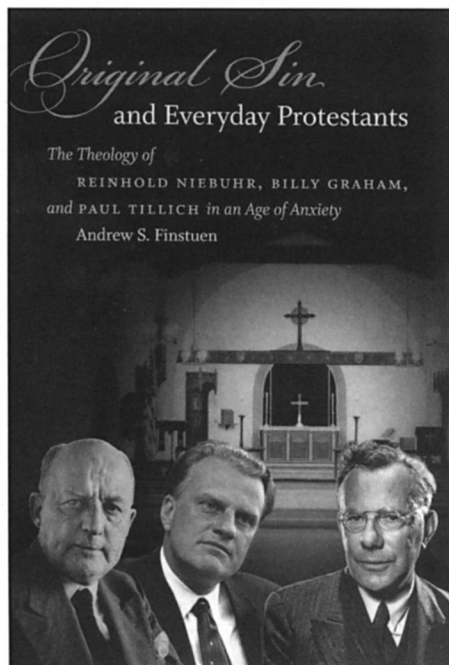
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Book Reviews



Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich. By Andrew S. Finstuen. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 272pp. \$41.95.)

This is a terrific book for those who know only a little about the theological climate of the United States in the period just after World War II. Those who lived through this period may quibble with the way Finstuen lumps Billy Graham in with theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Writing a half-century later, however, Finstuen uncovers what was then obscure: namely, that the concept of sin was the glue that bonded

postwar American Protestants, and brought mainline and evangelical thought together more closely than at any other time in the twentieth century—or since.

The first section of the book is an excellent introduction to the “captive revival” and the theological renewal of the period. Here Finstuen does battle with nearly every other historian of religion of the period. While the distinctions he makes between his work and others’ are sometimes overdrawn, he soundly defends his appraisal of original sin as the central feature of the theological climate of the time.

Finstuen’s work is a necessary corrective to later appropriations of Niebuhr, Graham, and Tillich, which, he notes, tend to ignore or dispute the centrality of original sin in their work. Though this is less true with Niebuhr, current interpretations of all three minimize this feature in their theology. Niebuhr is mostly remembered as a realist in politics and international relations; Graham is recalled as a chaplain to presidents and an excoriator of personal sins and modern secular society; Tillich is currently celebrated as a cultural theologian and a philosopher of faith, but there is little awareness of his critical appreciation for the limits of human goodness.

Finstuen’s argument—that original sin was at the core of

these theologians’ preaching and publishing—is convincing. His most creative research links his key figures to the ordinary Protestants who corresponded thoughtfully with them, showing through these letters how pervasive popular thinking about sin was at the time. If I have one criticism, it is that his forceful treatment of these three figures makes their theologies stand out as too influential in an account that argues sin as central to the Christian faith. Nevertheless, Finstuen’s book challenges us to revisit this critical era to notice how pervasive talk and thought of sin was in the years following the Great Depression until 1970. In this context, he shows Graham, Tillich and Niebuhr to be exemplary figures of the neo-orthodox and neo-evangelical movements that led pastors and people alike to ask if segregation was sin, and if bombing Hiroshima was sin—not *sinful*, but based in a systemic disorder (sin) which affected human nature in all areas of life. That such ways of speaking are unfamiliar today—even within most churches—argues the importance of Finstuen’s book and its contribution to understanding this seminal period of twentieth century American religion.

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