

Wagner's Parsifal: An Appreciation in the Light of His Theological Journey. By Richard H. Bell. Veritas 10. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013. Pp. xx + 380. \$44.

The book is a comprehensive reflection on the meaning of Richard Wagner's last music drama as well as a testimony to the "existential journey" (xiv) of its author, a professor of theology at the University of Nottingham (UK).

The debate about the Christian character of *Parsifal* started in the wake of the work's first staging at the Festival Theatre in Bayreuth in August 1882. Occasionally, it tended toward the absurd, but the growing interest in serious Wagner scholarship since the 1970s led to more nuanced evaluations. Evidently, the work draws on several religious sources and traditions. It interweaves the sacred and the secular in a knot that is difficult to disentangle. The story of the hero, Parsifal, who becomes wise through compassion or *Mitleid* is compatible with features of Christianity, Schopenhauer's philosophy, and Buddhism.

B. intends "to appreciate the work 'on its own terms'" (15). Chapters 1–4 sketch Wagner's intellectual development, describe the genesis of the work, and offer a dramatic outline. Chapter 5, "Encounter with 'Christ' in Parsifal," develops the first interpretive layer." The following chapters focus on specific topics (atonement, sin, predestination, anti-Judaism). Eventually, B. argues, *Parsifal* is indeed a Christian work that preaches "Christ crucified," not as a "symbol depicting reality [but as] reality itself" (302).

B. carefully describes his methodological procedure, consults many sources, and converses with a wide range of scholars. While the focus on the Christian aspects is certainly warranted, it is marred by questionable interpretations. Act 3 of *Parsifal* clearly states that humankind has no access to the crucified Christ and instead should look to the redeemed human being. The final line of the work is the chorus, "Redemption to the Redeemer," which refers back to Parsifal's sudden perception of "the Savior's lament [about the] profaned sanctuary: 'Redeem me, save me from hands defiled by guilt!'" The work proclaims Christ *redeemed*. Whatever this means, it hardly conforms to the Gospels' Passion narratives or Paul's theology of the cross. B. finds in *Parsifal* the idea that Jesus "saves human beings from their radical sin and their suffering," which he invokes as proof of the work's "higher Christology" (249). Unfortunately, the argument rests on a translation mistake. On August 8, 1874, Wagner muses about Christ's "superiority" (*Überlegenheit*), not "transcendence," as B. translates it (see 118). A further translation error accompanies the idea that Wagner has in mind a new, "Christianized" "dogma" suitable to traditional Christian teachings (see 305 n. 199).

Some conclusions are inconsistent. B. writes, "For Wagner the regeneration of humankind can only come about by the blood of Christ. Some may consider this politically incorrect, but it is no more so than Paul's analysis of the human situation. For Paul, 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23); the only hope is justification through faith in Christ" (132). The comparison ignores that Paul's concept of the blood of Christ has no racial undertones, whereas Wagner's view of Christ is closely related to his ideas about race, as B. himself acknowledges. Moreover, Wagner's ruminations about the "sole true dwelling place" of religion in "the deepest,

holiest inner chamber of the individual” (*On State and Religion* [1864]) remind B. of Luther’s emphasis on the practical, not speculative nature of faith. In fact, Wagner’s ideas are rather mystical. The invocation of a “special revelation” (299) for the few religious insiders contradicts the Reformation’s emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. Wagner admired Luther as a cultural hero, but he had scant interest in Reformation theology (*sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura*). In general, Wagner’s vision of “genuine” Christianity is different from generally recognized Christian teachings, in the broad sense. Although Wagner vaguely believed in divinity, he was critical of the idea of a personal God, and in his later works he heaped scorn on the idea of God the Creator. B. recognizes this (230) but then explains it away by associating Wagner’s rejection of God the Creator with Luther’s idea of the hidden God (*deus absconditus*) (see 154, 316).

B. rightly emphasizes that Parsifal tells us something about redemption, but he tends to make Wagner’s views suitable to Christian doctrines, while ignoring Buddhist and Vedic sources. The welcome effort to retrieve the work’s contemporary relevance comes at the expense of critical-hermeneutical reflection. Even the cordial foreword by musicologist and Wagner scholar Roger Allen (Oxford University) sounds a word of caution. Allen says that the book’s central thesis “must be open to question and will undoubtedly be challenged” (xii). So be it.

Matthias Gockel
Friedrich-Schiller-Universität, Jena

The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth. Edited by Richard E. Burnett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013, Pp. xxviii + 242.

A handbook, at least ideally, is something specialists provide for nonspecialists, enabling the latter to grasp the crucial contours of an author’s work in an accessible format that lends itself to quick and sporadic yet accurate comprehension. In the academic world, handbooks serve the cause of teachers who find themselves in need of a short but insightful summary of what an author had to say about a topic and supply a handy reference for scholars who find themselves having to say something about an issue that is marginal to their topic but cannot be avoided. In the church, they are indispensable for adult educators in search of accessible summaries of complex themes. When they are done well, handbooks provide a modest but essential service to both academy and church. This volume is done very well indeed.

Many contributors to this handbook have made significant contributions to the explosion of scholarly interest in Barth over the past quarter of a century. Nearly all the most prominent Barth scholars of recent years are represented, and the distribution between older and younger scholars is exemplary. Most important is that nearly all the contributors took their work seriously. Of the 108 entries, which cover mostly concepts of Barth’s theology but also include his major interlocutors, not a single one is glaringly weak; and while any Barth specialist will quibble with